South Haven Tribune

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August 24, 2025

SH sets new utility rates through 2027

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council approved the electric utility ordinance amendment and set the utility rates from 2025-27.

During Monday's meeting, the city council held a public hearing on the proposed ordinance and utility rates. Vice President of Utility Financial Solutions Dawn Lund made a presentation to city council that showed details of the recommended rate changes.

In the presentation, she said there would be a 4.9 percent system rate adjustment that would take place on Oct. 1 of this year.

"What mainly is driving the rate increase is your power cost provider MPPA (Michigan Public Power Agency) projected that energy and capacity costs are going to actually increase for 2026 at about 14.5 percent," Lund said. "That doesn't include transmission."

Lund also recommended the city adopt a value of solar credit and a commercial EV charging rate on Oct. 1.

In the presentation, Lund showed an example of how the rate increase would affect a residential bill over the next three years.

Currently, the average resident pays around $82.52. In the first year the bill would increase to $87.39. In the second year it would rise to $90.20, while in the third year it would be $94.23.

"The industry standards are to charge a monthly customer charge," Lund said. "That cost covers the things that do not vary with usage."

Lund gave examples of fixed costs including administrative charges, customer service, meter reading and billing.

The recommended customer charge would be set at $8 and the kilowatt hour and transmission costs adjustment would be 14.5 cents.

After the presentation and the public hearing, the city council discussed their options when it came to the ordinance amendment and rate changes.

The ordinance amendment included having future rates be set by a resolution instead of by ordinance.

"What we're doing with the ordinance, making it so that we can change our rates via resolution is standard practice," Council Member George Sleeper said. "It makes it a little bit easier to change our rates, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it's always going to be a rate increase, it could also be a rate decrease."

After discussion, city council approved the ordinance amendment and set the electric utility rates.

Other items

The city council approved the purchase of one leaf collection truck from MTECH for $270,395.76.

The city bought two leaf collection trucks in 2014 and one of those trucks has been out of commission for more than a year.

"It is very vital that we have two operating leaf trucks," City Manager Kate Hosier said. "We even do it on the weekends just to keep up and with just one leaf truck it's not able to keep up."

The truck was unable to be

See COUNCIL, page A2

'It's harder to learn when you're hungry'

SWMI schools stay the course on meals, amid state budget delays

By LAUREN RICE
For the Tribune

As parents get ready to send their kids to the first day of school on Monday, they can count on breakfast and lunch being available for free for their little academic.

At least until Oct. 1.

The Michigan School Meals (MSM) program, which provides those meals to K-12 students at public schools – as of now – ends Sept. 30.

The program has been funded by the state, with federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars filling in the gaps, for the last two academic years.

Before then, federal legislation passed during the COVID-19 pandemic funded these free school meals nationally.

Change to the status quo could be coming from the Michigan Legislature, depending on which version of the State School Aid plan passes both houses.

According to an article from The Detroit News, the school aid plan is one of the partisan items which pushed budget approval past the July 1 deadline. If a budget is not in place by Oct. 1, there could be a state government shutdown.

Berrien RESA Superintendent Eric Hoppstock said the uncertainty of not only free meal funding, but the rest of the school aid plan is putting districts "in a pickle."

"Without a budget from the state, there's a couple things that districts are trying to weigh out: Do I go ahead and put some of our fund dollars into our program? But then I may need those fund dollars," he said in reference to the hypothetical scenario for administrators at the end of September. "Let's say worst case scenario, the Legislature does not pass a budget by Oct. 1 and we go into a shut down. Well I'm gonna need that cash just to continue to pay people because my state aid payments may be delayed.

"I'm not saying that's gonna happen, but it illustrates some of the conundrums that districts are having to think through."

Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Lakeshore Public Schools Food Service Director Pam Greiffendorf checks on supplies for the upcoming school year Wednesday at Lakeshore High School in Stevensville.

Lakeshore High School's cafeteria sits empty as staff prepare for the start of the school year next week.

The entire Michigan budget and the amount of money the state has to invest in the MSM program is also affected by changes to federal funding. Hoppstock said the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act means less SNAP and Medicaid funding.

In previous years, those dollars had also supported the MSM program.

"When you start reducing that (funding support) you're really putting the onus on the state," he said.

The Citizens Research Council published a report stating the Big Beautiful Bill is leaving a $1.1 billion hole in Michigan's budget. SNAP funding is seeing a cut, reducing the federal support for MSM and complicating the larger budgeting process.

> **"We're going to provide meals the best we can, but we are somewhat held hostage to the state budget."**
>
> **ERIC HOPPSTOCK**
> Berrien RESA Superintendent

Hoppstock said there are about 25,000 K-12 students across the school districts in Berrien County. He said there are varying degrees of need among these districts for support programs like MSM.

He estimated the number of students qualifying for SNAP assistance, and therefore the previous system of income-qualified discounted school meals, has increased by 25-30 percent in the last 20 years.

While the need is there, he said it's not realistic to expect the local school districts themselves to make up for incomplete MSM funding.

"Delaying and going past that July 1 deadline has really left districts in an untenable position," Hoppstock said. "What is the cash going to look like flowing into a district in general? Are you as a state going to make your payments? What programs are you going to defund and roll into other funding, if at all."

Waiting on Lansing

The way forward depends on each school district. St. Joseph Public Schools Superintendent Kristen Bawks said her district is moving forward with the expectation that meals provided by MSM funding will continue as they did last year.

"At this point in time, we are anticipating and counting on our Legislature to create a budget and have that available to us," she said. "As far as a contingency plan, that's not something that we're necessarily working on. We're planning for things to stay the same and should they not, we'll have clear communications to our families."

She explained it's not uncommon for the district's budget to be formed before a final version of the state budget is passed – though it usually doesn't take quite this long.

If MSM program funding changes, Bawks said making a budget amendment for the district is not too difficult.

"I think it's just important for parents to know that we built the budget based on how we have always built the budget ..." Bawks said. "We feel confident in the budget that we've built and once we learn more out of Lansing we'll know what potentially needs to be amended."

Lakeshore Public Schools is also maintaining the MSM program until Sept. 30, said Superintendent Greg Eding.

Lakeshore sent an email to parents last week explaining the situation, and suggested anyone who qualifies for a free or reduced lunch rate separate from the MSM program, fill out the paperwork now.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Eding said.

Having the forms ready in advance will make the transition back to the pre-pandemic lunch rate easier if the time comes, he said.

"Any time we can meet one of those basic needs for students, it's a good thing," he said. "It's harder to learn when you're hungry."

However, losing access to state-funded free lunches could have less of an impact on families who are a part of Benton Harbor Area Schools.

BHAS Food Service Director Quinn Tabbert said the

See MEALS, page A6

$25k grant awarded to Nature's Country Cupboard

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The City of South Haven Downtown Development Authority recently announced that Nature's Country Cupboard has been awarded a $25,000 grant.

According to a news release, the grant is from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation Match on Main Program where 133 applicants requested over $3.2 million in funding for small business projects across Michigan.

"With only $1.5 million available in program funds, this year's round was exceptionally competitive," the release stated. "All awardees represent the heart of what makes Michigan's downtowns thrive."

The Match on Main grant funding will enable Stephanie and Theresa Nowak, owners of Nature's Country Cupboard located at 509 Phoenix Street, the ability to create a series of renovations and essential upgrades to transform an underutilized storage space at their location into a fully functional and accessible wellness center.

The primary objective is to revitalize the space to foster economic development and community wellness by offering expanded services, including massage therapy, practitioner-grade supplements, aromatherapy products and free educational wellness programs.

"City leadership sets a high priority in the retention of existing business and attracting new businesses and industry to the area," the release stated. "As part of this effort, the DDA will continue to search for ways to assist small businesses in growing and prospering through MEDC grant funding initiatives."

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 126th Year

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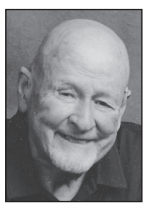
OBITUARIES

Alfred Coe

Feb. 3, 1929 – Aug. 9, 2025



Our father Al Coe passed away peacefully on Aug. 9, 2025 surrounded by his children. He was born Feb. 3, 1929 in St. Louis, Mo. to Robert L. Coe, Sr. and Dorothy Coates Lipke.

In 1956, he was introduced to our mother in a camera shop. He and Clarissa Anne Stewart were married Dec. 8 of that year. Together they raised their children Victoria "Vicki" (companion Sherry Sanders), Priscilla Coe-Brandt, Jessica (Mark) Thannen and Jonathan (Susan).

Dad wanted to provide a small town upbringing for his children so we relocated from the Chicago suburbs in 1973. He has called South Haven home ever since.

After an early career in photography, Dad spent most of his work life as a manufacturer's representative in the greater Chicago area. After retirement, he filled his days with volunteer work. Dad brought the We Care Festival of Trees to South Haven. In 2000 he decided he wanted more out of retirement and went to work for the US Census Bureau. He continued that work for 10 years.

Dad was a performer! He played the role of Peter in many productions of The Last Supper. He went on to play God at the First United Methodist Church. More recently he was active in Reader's Theatre with Senior Services.

Dad had a powerful voice. He sang at the Missouri Military Academy as a cadet, Hope Reformed Church, Peace Lutheran Church, Hospice, River Ridge, South Haven Area Men's Chorus, weddings, funerals and anywhere people would listen. He sang to our mother as he cared for her until her death in 2015.

Dad was an avid photographer. He would spend so much time and energy perfecting the shot. He gifted many photos of Lake Michigan, the lighthouse, the beach and nature to his friends.

Dad found love again and in October 2020, he and Marietta Kozlik exchanged vows of love and commitment. He spent his remaining years cherishing Marietta and her daughters: Terry (Lynn) Dotson, Rhonda (Paul) Vanden Braden, Donna Jordan, and Vickiy (Steve) Wall. They all survive.

Our dad is preceded in death by his parents; our mother; his brothers Robert L. Coe Jr, David Coe; and twin granddaughters.

Dad is survived by his four children; grandchildren Jennifer Vander Wall, Sarah Martinez, Colin Marr, Martha (Joe) Obaseki, Kaitlyn Brandt, Andrew Thannen, Clarissa Thannen, Alexander "AJ" and Daniel "DJ"; great-grandchildren Kylar, Emmarsan, Kaiden, Rylen, Blaine, Juliana, Ava, Brecken, Noah, Carter, Layla, Delanie, Harper, Liam; great-great-grandchild Finnan; siblings Jerry (Jeanie), Marilyn Brown; sister-in-law Georgianna; nieces; nephews; and many, many friends.

We would like to thank all of you that have helped over the years with our parents. We appreciate the endless love and support you have given. Thank you Vickiy, Steve and CiCi Wall for loving and caring for our Dad. Thank you Centrica Care Navigators and Rose Arbor staff for providing comfort and support on our dad's final journey.

Dad proudly stated he was going to medical school and he has now completed his final goal. He dedicated his remains to the WMU Homer Stryker School of Medicine.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. on Sept. 6 in South Haven at First United Methodist Church, 429 Michigan Ave, South Haven, MI with a luncheon following at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI. Internment will be at a later date.

In lieu of flowers, please consider donating to Van Buren County Senior Services, 8837 M-140, South Haven, MI 49090; Peace Lutheran Church, 06321 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI 49090; Centrica Care Navigators, 7100 Stadium Dr, Kalamazoo, MI 49009; Rose Arbor, 5473 Croyden Ave, Kalamazoo, MI 49009; or a hospice of your choice.

Nenita Figuracion

March 2, 1936 – Aug. 19, 2025

Nenita Co Figuracion passed away peacefully at home, surrounded by her family, on Aug. 19, 2025.

She was born on March 2, 1936, to Federico Co and Rosalia Cuevas Co in Baggao, Cagayan, Philippines. The second eldest of ten children, Nenita grew up with one sister and eight brothers.

She was preceded in death by her beloved husband, Felipe B. Figuracion, in January 2024.

Nenita graduated from the Chinese General Hospital School of Nursing in Manila, Philippines, in 1957 and immigrated to the United States in 1959. Sponsored by the University of Chicago, she pursued post-graduate nursing studies and training.

She met Felipe in Chicago in 1960, and they were united in marriage in 1961. Nenita went on to practice nursing at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Toronto, Ontario, Canada (1964–1965) and at St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (1965–1968).

In 1968, Felipe and Nenita moved their family to Michigan, where Nenita worked at Lapeer General Hospital until 1970. The family later moved to Battle Creek in 1971 before settling in South Haven in 1975.

Beyond managing a busy household, Nenita dedicated herself to her children's activities, volunteered at their schools and at St. Basil Catholic Church. She often accompanied Felipe to medical conferences and meetings.

Known for her delicious homemade meals, snacks and desserts, Nenita found joy in cooking and sharing her food with family and friends. Once her children were grown, she returned to nursing part-time as a charge nurse at Countryside Nursing Home in 1990, retiring in April 2014.

Nenita loved traveling in the U.S. and abroad, with her most memorable trip being a Concorde flight to England. She cherished time with family and friends, especially her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She was a founding member of the Philippine American Association of Southwest Michigan, maintaining strong ties to the Filipino community.

A social and welcoming host, Nenita and Felipe held countless gatherings at their home; family and friends were always invited to enjoy their beach. She also loved dancing, gardening, and cheering on basketball, tennis and football games.

Nenita will be remembered as a strong, loving matriarch and prayer warrior with a generous heart.

She is survived by her children Angeli (Brent) Certa of South Haven, Mich.; Philip (Halyna) Figuracion of Upper Montclair, N.J.; and Rosali (Kip) Richards of Saline, Mich. She is also survived by her grandchildren Kara (Donald) Roman, Shawna Mulvihill, Adam (Kate) Mulvihill Figuracion, Alexander Figuracion, Nicholas Figuracion, and Gabriella Richards; as well as two great-grandchildren, Marcy and Donovan Roman.

Philippians 1:21, 23: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain…to depart and be with Christ is better by far."

Visitation will be held from 11:30 a.m. until the time of the funeral Mass at 1 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 28 at St. Basil Catholic Church, 513 Monroe Blvd, South Haven, Michigan 49090. Fr. Evelio Ramirez will officiate.

Donations in Nenita's memory may be made to St. Basil Catholic Church. The family extends their heartfelt gratitude to Caring Circle of Corewell Health for the compassionate care provided in recent months.

To those who choose to leave a memory or condolence can go to: www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements are entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel-Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services. 269-637-0333.

Gary Horton

Dec. 9, 1940 – July 3, 2025

Gary J. Horton, age 84, of South Haven, Mich., passed away on July 3, 2025 – just in time to secure the best seat in the house for the annual fireworks he so loved.

He was a beloved husband to Karen and a devoted father to Matthew and Melissa, and a grandfather to Matthew and Beth's children, Hannah and Henry, and Melissa's dog Lexi. He was a devoted big brother to Roger and his late twin, Russell Mark Horton; brother-in-law to Bobbe Horton, Sharon Horton, and the late Robert and Francis Eberhardt; uncle to Cora Eberhardt-Swailes (Tim), Emily Horton-Smith (Andrew), Laurel Horton, Rob Horton (Stephanie), and Alison Horton-Hill (Jesse); and great-uncle to Camille Swailes, Alexa and Zachary Horton, Solomon and Xochitl Smith, Caleb and Sophie Hill and Russell J Horton.

He was preceded in death by his parents, J and Ruth Horton, brother Russel M. Horton – as well as a lifetime's worth of appreciative horses and dogs.

Gary was born in Grand Rapids, Mich. on Dec. 9, 1940.

He graduated from South Haven High School in 1958, Grand Rapids Junior College in 1960 – where he earned the Distinguished Alumni Award in 1992 – and Michigan State University in 1962. He was a member of Sigma Kappa Theta at Junior College and Phi Delta Theta at MSU. He also served in the Michigan Air National Guard.

A celebrated advertising executive, Gary began his career marketing for Fisher Body. He then spent 13 years with Leo Burnett where he rose from copywriter to VP Creative Director leading accounts including Allstate, Kellogg's, Memorex, Phillip Morris, P&G, United Airlines, Schlitz Beer and more.

His career continued with Y&R and DMB&B where he was Deputy Managing Director and Chief Creative Officer, Chairman of the Creative Review Board and a member of the DMB&B North America Creative Council – spearheading accounts such as American Dairy Association, Cadillac, Pontiac and Amoco.

His work earned him the industry's highest honors including Clio's, Addy's and Mobius awards – plus many more.

He is known for campaigns such as "Is it live or is it Memorex?" and "You only go around once in life...go for the gusto" (Schlitz). His $50 million campaign for the Cadillac Catera –" the Caddy that zigs" – earned him mainstream publicity and was featured in Newsweek magazine.

He was widely respected in the industry for his creativity, vision and leadership. Adding to his talents, he did voiceover work for many local and national TV and radio campaigns.

Upon retirement, Gary never stopped working. Serving as a board member of the Michigan Maritime Museum in South Haven and as interim director, he played a key role in the fundraising effort that brought the museum's tall ship, the Friends Goodwill to South Haven.

In his free time, he was no stranger to running, sailing, biking (including a century ride of 100 miles), cross-country skiing and entertaining friends and family. Though Parkinson's disease slowly took from Gary many of the things that made him who he was, he never once complained.

A celebration of life will be held at 2 p.m. on Sept. 6 at the Michigan Maritime Museum.

Michigan cities propose $800 million investment in affordable housing

By JORDYN HERMANI/ BRIDGE MICHIGAN
Bridge Michigan

LANSING — A group representing local governments across Michigan is calling on state lawmakers to set aside $800 million over the next five years to help spur affordable housing projects, predicting the cash infusion could result in 10,000 new or rehabilitated homes.

The proposal from the Michigan Municipal League would provide funding to developers for projects in communities that relax certain zoning regulations – such as allowing duplexes in residential areas – an effort to ward off any potential mandates from the state.

The goal is to encourage more affordable housing options "through partnerships and not preemption," said Sault Ste. Marie Mayor Don Gerrie, who serves as president of the Municipal League.

But it remains to be seen whether Michigan lawmakers will adopt the proposal – or approve an initial wave of funding for the next fiscal year – during what has already been a tumultuous budget cycle.

A bipartisan coalition of state lawmakers is backing the proposal, including Democratic Rep. Amos O'Neil of Saginaw and Republican Rep. Mark Tisdel of Rochester Hills. But none could say Tuesday whether they'll be able to get funding into the next state budget.

"I'm not sure of any guarantees in this town … but if this is a priority for the state, we need to act like that," Municipal League CEO and Executive Director Dan Gilmartin said in a news conference at Lansing's City Hall.

Rosie Jones, spokesperson for Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks, D-Grand Rapids, told Bridge in a statement that Democrats are "committed to increasing accessible, affordable housing," and that Brinks personally "looks forward to learning more about this proposal."

COUNCIL

From page A1

fixed due to the parts no longer being made and it was concluded by city staff the truck needed to be replaced.

Hosier said this cost was not a budgeted expense, but a needed one.

"We are intending on moving some of the purchases that we have not yet made this fiscal year to the next fiscal year so that we can afford this with no changes to our budget," Hosier said.

City council approved three special events including:

■ Pretty Arts and Crafts Festival to be held from 4 to 8 p.m. on Aug. 23, at Elkenburg Park.

■ Holiday in the Park 2025, to be held from 4 to 7 p.m. on Nov. 28, in various locations throughout the city.

■ New Year's Eve 2025, to be held at 1 p.m. on Dec. 31, 2025, through 1 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2026 at the Phoenix and Center Street intersection.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

Al-Van Humane Society

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Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

Meet our Pet of the Week, Meeko!

Meeko may be blind, but he doesn't let that slow him down one bit! This brave little explorer is learning to navigate the world in his own way and has shown us just how resilient (and downright lovable) he is. He's sweet and playful once he gets to know you, but that may take some extra time. Meeko loves to explore at his own pace and will happily prove that love doesn't need sight to be felt. He may take a little time to learn the layout of his forever home, but with patience and love, he'll settle in and become your loyal companion. We're also happy to offer guidance to help his adopter support him as he continues adjusting to life without sight. Meeko's courage is inspiring, his affection is heart-melting, and he's ready to show his forever family that he's more than capable of living a happy, joy-filled life. Interested in adopting Meeko? Visit us online at al-van.org/adopt to submit an adoption application.

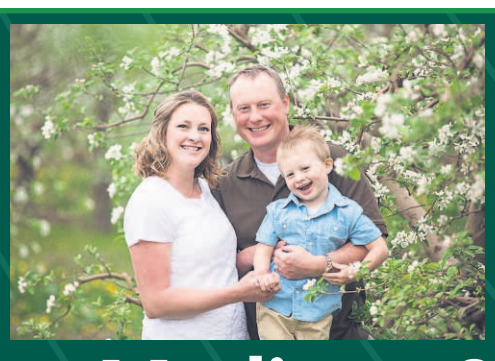
Par-4-Paws

Join us for our annual Par 4 Paws golf outing on September 21st at Hawkshead Golf Course! This 4-person scramble kicks off at 10am and will be followed by a delicious lunch and a silent auction featuring a variety of great items. Whether you're a seasoned golfer or just out for a fun day on the greens, you'll be helping raise funds to support the animals at Al-Van Humane Society. Gather your team, enjoy a beautiful day of golf, and make a difference for pets in need! To sign-up visit our website at al-van.org or give us a call at (269)637-5062.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST

This Week's Wishlist This week our biggest need is cleaning supplies. Keeping our shelter sparkling clean isn't just about looking nice, it's about keeping our animals healthy and comfortable! Supplies like medium and large latex gloves, paper towels, trash bags and dish soap help us maintain a safe, sanitary space for all the pets in our care. Every roll, bottle, or box makes a big difference!

PriorityHealth



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Clevenger to run for state Senate District 20

Casco Twp. treasurer seeks seat held by term-limited senator

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Allegan County Republican Chair and Casco Township Treasurer Kenny Clevenger has filed to run for the Michigan Senate District 20.

The seat is currently held by term-limited state Sen. Aric Nesbitt, who is one of several candidates running to succeed Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

According to a news release, Celvenger, 35, considers himself to be an "experienced leader in business, local government, education and party governance."

"Michigan residents are suffering," Clevenger said in the release. "The shifting control of legendary Michigan businesses to out-of-state, even out-of-country interests, does not bode well for our future. Losing jobs and investment is a devastating trend. The next Legislature needs experienced hands with proven results laser focused on turning this state around."

In his second term as Casco Treasurer, Clevenger previously served on the South Haven school board and served a term as the president of the Van Buren Association of School Boards during his tenure.

Clevenger said he rose from Allegan County GOP secretary to party chair in 2022, earning reelection in 2024.

Prior to his government and party involvement, Clevenger was the general manager of the Best Buy electronics store in Benton Township. He started as a part-time sales associate in his hometown store in Battle Creek before working his way up to general manager. After that he started and currently runs a small business.

"As a public servant, husband and a father, I believe leadership starts at home," Clevenger said in the release. "The same values that guide my family – responsibility, compassion and service – will guide my work in Lansing."

If elected, Clevenger said his priorities will center on strengthening local economies, safeguarding individual freedoms, cleaning up government corruption and waste and ensuring solid education for Michigan youth.

"Our district needs a senator who feels the hopes, dreams and challenges of the people and who will get his hands dirty to produce results," Clevenger said in the release.

District 20 in the state Senate spans parts of Allegan, Berrien, Van Buren and Kent counties.

Photo provided

Allegan County Republican Chair and Casco Township Treasurer Kenny Clevenger recently filed to run for a Michigan Senate seat.

SHAES TEAM JOINS ROCKET FOOTBALL FOR PRE-SEASON DRILLS

Photos provided / Tom Renner

The South Haven Area Emergency Services recently joined Rocket Football aspirants in some pre-season conditioning drills.

Rocket Football aspirants took part in some pre-season conditioning drills that featured fire-related equipment.

To prepare for fall sports, Rocket Football players partnered with South Haven Area Emergency Services to engage in conditioning drills.

Grant to expand recycling options in Van Buren

By TRIBUNE STAFF

PAW PAW — American Beverage recently announced a $150,000 grant in collaboration with The Recycling Partnership to the Van Buren Conservation District to expand and enhance recycling access across the county.

According to a news release, this grant will help upgrade infrastructure at four township transfer stations by adding new drop-off recycling capacity for more than 17,000 residents.

"This investment will make it easier for Van Buren County families to recycle bottles and cans, and help those materials get collected and remade into new products as intended," President and CEO of the Michigan Beverage Association Derek Bajema said in the release. "By working hand-in-hand with local and state leaders, we're delivering meaningful results that improve recycling systems and reduce waste in communities across Michigan."

The grant complements funding from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy along with matching contributions from conservation district and the participating townships.

Together, these contributions will support the construction, site development and installation of compactors at each transfer station, creating accessible and modernized drop-off recycling sites that will support the entire county.

"Over the next decade, the new infrastructure upgrades are projected to divert more than 4 million pounds of recyclables from landfills," the release stated. "Including an estimated 156,000 pounds of PET plastic and 52,000 pounds of aluminum – valuable materials that can be used to produce new beverage containers."

This marks the 12th Every Bottle Back project in Michigan, building on the more than $1.7 million invested to date across 11 communities including Ann Arbor, Bay City, Livonia, Trenton, Ypsilanti Township and six communities in Marquette County.

This project is the latest from Every Bottle Back – an initiative of The Coca-Cola Company, Keurig Dr Pepper and PepsiCo – that launched in 2019.

"In total, the investments across 65 communities are estimated to yield more than 725 million new pounds of recycled PET and 46 million more pounds of recycled aluminum over the next decade," the release stated.

Local author to host book event at South Haven library

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Local author Susan P. Ryan will host a special author event at the South Haven Memorial Library to promote the release of her new medical memoir: "Brainstorm: Navigating Life with Chronic Migraine."

According to a news release, the event will take place from 6 to 7 p.m. on Sept. 10 in the community room of the library.

"The truly remarkable thing about 'Brainstorm' is its breadth," Author of the foreword of "Brainstorm" David Sherer, M.D. said in the release. "The author is successful in covering just about every angle one can imagine when it comes to migraine, be it symptom description, impact on one's life, treatment options and even the natural history (or progression) of the disease.

"I cannot think of another book available that deals with migraine so completely. If you suffer from migraine, or know someone who does, this book will be an invaluable resource."

Brainstorm is a tool for migraineurs to learn how to better advocate for themselves and to find their path to an improved quality of life.

"Since migraine is the number two cause of disability, affecting one in seven people, it deserves better recognition," the release stated.

A former South Haven resident, Ryan will share her hard-earned insight for better management of Brainstorm.

The event will include a brief reading of the book, a question and answer time and a book signing.

"The author looks forward to seeing friends, former neighbors, migraineurs and anyone who knows someone afflicted by migraine," the release stated.

Armin Lear Press has published 95 books since its birth in 2020. The company has staff and affiliates in the U.S. and France.

Armin Lear is a member of IBPA and distributes books worldwide in English through Ingram and Baker & Taylor.

For more information go to arminlear.com.

New cellphone restrictions in 17 states as school begins

By JEFF AMY
Associated Press

Jamel Bishop is seeing a big change in his classrooms as he begins his senior year at Doss High School in Louisville, Kentucky, where cellphones are now banned during instructional time.

In previous years, students often weren't paying attention and wasted class time by repeating questions, the teenager said. Now, teachers can provide "more one-on-one time for the students who actually need it."

Kentucky is one of 17 states and the District of Columbia starting this school year with new restrictions, bringing the total to 35 states with laws or rules limiting phones and other electronic devices in school. This change has come remarkably quickly: Florida became the first state to pass such a law in 2023.

Both Democrats and Republicans have taken up the cause, reflecting a growing consensus that phones are bad for kids' mental health and take their focus away from learning, even as some researchers say the issue is less clear-cut.

"Anytime you have a bill that's passed in California and Florida, you know you're probably onto something that's pretty popular," Georgia state Rep. Scott Hilton, a Republican, told a forum on cellphone use last week in Atlanta.

Phones are banned throughout the school day in 18 of the states and the District of Columbia, although Georgia and Florida impose such "bell-to-bell" bans only from kindergarten through eighth grade. Another seven states ban them during class time, but not between classes or during lunch. Still others, particularly those with traditions of local school control, mandate only a cellphone policy, believing districts will take the hint and sharply restrict phone access.

In Michigan

In the Michigan House in July, a Republican-sponsored bill directing schools to ban phones bell-to-bell in grades K-8 and during high school instruction time was defeated in July after Democrats insisted on upholding local control. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, among multiple governors who made restricting phones in schools a priority this year, is still calling for a bill to come to her desk.

Research remains in an early stage

Some researchers say it's not yet clear what types of social media may cause harm, and whether restrictions have benefits, but teachers "love the policy," according to Julie Gazmararian, a professor of public health at Emory University who does surveys and focus groups to research the effects of a phone ban in middle school grades in the Marietta school district near Atlanta.

FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE
DUMP DAYS DUMP DAY
GENEVA TOWNSHIP Property Owners
SATURDAY Sept 20, 2025
8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
Disposal of NORMAL HOUSEHOLD REFUSE ONLY. ONE (1) TRIP ONLY; One (1) appliance per household. NO REFRIGERATORS.
NO FREE DUMPING of Construction materials, commercial dumping or tires.
RECYCLING - FREE - Save the Environment.
LOCATION: CR 384 - 1 mile east of M-43 OR 1 mile west of 68th Street - North Side.
TRANSFER STATION PASS REQUIRED.
Geneva Township Board
FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE

Black River Manor features outdoor family adventures

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently welcomed the Black River Manor as a new member.

According to a news release, the chamber held a ribbon cutting ceremony at the manor's location along the Central Branch of the Black River.

"Founded in 2021, Black River Manor is dedicated to providing outdoor family adventures that encourage guests to 'leave your devices and all their vices behind,'" the release stated.

In 2023, the business became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, expanding its mission to serve disadvantaged children as well as the general public introducing them to experiences such as fishing, gardening and exploring nature beyond an urban setting.

"As a father of nine and a lifelong lover of the great outdoors, I wanted to create a place my own family would be excited to visit," Dan FioRito said in the release. "If I can get my wife and kids to approve, I know other families will love it, too."

Black River Manor offers a variety of experiences designed to connect families with the beauty of Southwest Michigan. The property features 15 luxury Amish-built log cabins, each sleeping six to ten guests, with river views.

Visitors can enjoy 4.5 miles of wooded trails with three bridges, professional courts for both beach volleyball and bocce ball and a massive 50-by-50-foot sandbox for endless play.

The Joe Louis Events Barn, connected to a 30-by-90-foot events greenhouse, provides space for gatherings of all kinds.

A 150-person chapel, complete with oak pews and stained glass from St. Columba Church of Chicago, adds a unique and historic touch.

Adding to its offerings, Black River Manor also operates a 14-passenger bus equipped with a high-quality sound system and lights, providing local transportation for guests in and around South Haven.

"This service is a valuable asset for connecting visitors to the community and will play a key role in the Manor's presence in the area for years to come," the release stated.

Looking ahead, the manor is developing a regenerative health spa featuring a Morozko ice bath, outdoor sauna, red light therapy and a high-end lap/hot tub for guests seeking wellness experiences.

"The Chamber is proud to welcome Black River Manor and support their mission of encouraging families to reconnect with each other and with nature, while highlighting the unique beauty of the South Haven area," the release stated.

For more information about Black River Manor, go to blackrivermanor.com or call 269-906-2369.

Photo provided

The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently welcomed the Black River Manor as a new member with a ribbon cutting ceremony.

The Black River Manor features 15 luxury Amish-built log cabins, each sleeping six to ten guests, with river views.

Black River Manor offers a variety of experiences designed to connect families with the beauty of Southwest Michigan.

Beckwith Theatre Company to host local playwright festival

By TRIBUNE STAFF

DOWAGIAC — Beckwith Theatre Company recently announced they are now accepting submissions for the Second Annual Local Playwright's Festival.

According to a news release, the festival will feature 10-minute plays from writers across Southwest Michigan and Northern Indiana.

The festival will showcase eight selected works during performances on Feb. 6 through 8, 2026.

"The festival serves multiple purposes: celebrating regional theatrical talent, connecting local playwrights with theater communities and supporting BTC's Capital Campaign," the release stated.

All proceeds from the performances will benefit the theater's capital fundraising efforts.

Playwrights residing in Berrien, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren counties in Michigan, as well as Elkhart, LaPorte and Saint Joseph counties in Indiana, are eligible to submit up to four plays each.

This year's submissions must incorporate one of five specific themes or props:

- Plays about or featuring senior citizens.
- Plays centering around a paper bag filled with $3,000.
- Plays featuring a cat tower as a central set piece.
- Plays incorporating a bean bag chair.
- Plays using a woman's hat from the 1920s-1930s era.

All plays must be performable in 10 minutes or less, require five or fewer actors, use minimal set pieces and props and fit within a 12-foot by 12-foot performance space.

The festival will present two acts, each featuring four 10-minute plays. Performances are scheduled for Friday and Saturday evenings and a Sunday matinee during the first weekend of February 2026.

Three plays will be pre-set for each act, with brief setup time for the fourth play between performances.

Important dates for the festival include:

- Entry Deadline: Oct.13, 2025, by 1:59 p.m.
- Selection Notification: Nov. 1-7, 2025.
- Technical Rehearsals: Feb. 1-5, 2026.
- Performances: Feb. 6-8, 2026.

All entries must be submitted digitally to btcplayfestival@gmail.com in PDF or Microsoft Word format.

Scripts should be formatted in 12-point Courier New or Aptos Mono typeface and not exceed 11 pages (excluding title page).

Playwrights must submit two separate files: one containing the play script and another with a title page including contact information.

A three-person panel will evaluate submissions based on feasibility, dramatic essentials, story/plot development, mood and genre clarity, character development, dialogue quality and overall theatrical merit.

Selected playwrights will receive two complimentary tickets to each performance and may be recognized publicly during the shows they attend.

Beckwith Theatre Company is located at 100 New York Avenue in Dowagiac, Mich.

For more information about the festival or the theater's capital campaign, go to www.beckwiththeatre.com or contact the theater at 269-782-7653.

Summer fundraiser exceeds goal for the Blue Star Trail

By TRIBUNE STAFF

FENNVILLE — The Friends of Blue Star Trail recently hosted the Toast to the Blue Star Trail fundraiser at Quiet Creek Farm in Fennville.

According to a news release, 150 guests gathered for a summer barbecue to show support for the Blue Star Trail and exceeded the fundraising goal of $100,000.

During the event, Saugatuck Township Manager Daniel DeFranco addressed the crowd, thanking the friends for its efforts and emphasizing that the Tribe, Michigan Department of Transportation, Department of Natural Resources, the municipalities and the friends all want and intend for the important connector trail to be built.

Friends' Board of Directors Member Richard Donovan gave an update of the trail progress during the event.

It the update, it was announced that Saugatuck Township recently received a conditional award of $2.5 million towards construction of the next section of the trail to the south, from Wiley Road to M89.

Donovan also explained that the trail construction from Holland Street to existing trail in Douglas was planned for this spring-summer, but had to be paused when possible archeological and cultural concerns were raised by the Gun Lake Tribe of the Potawatomi last fall.

"MDOT, which is funding the largest portion of construction costs, using federal dollars, is coordinating with the tribe to evaluate its concerns and mitigate any potential adverse effects," the release stated.

According to the release, the stakeholders are also waiting to hear about a pending grant application to the department of transportation for the trail's south end from Kal-Haven Trail to Baseline Road.

"Our board has been working very hard this last year towards construction of three sections of the planned Trail, even though we haven't yet gotten shovels in the ground," President of the Friends' Board Clark Carmichael said in the release. "We were so encouraged by the enthusiasm of the guests and their willingness to contribute to improving the community in this way."

Carmichael also expressed his gratitude during the event for the patience supporters have shown over the years while friends maneuvers through local, state and federal requirements.

During the barbeque, event Co-chairs, Ellen Donovan and Kevin Martin expressed special thanks to the event sponsors including Cathy and Clark Carmichael, Cottage Home, the Saugatuck Douglas Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, Jim Sellman, Meijer and Steve Manns and Dennis Tamburo.

Friends' next fundraising event is the Lakeshore Harvest Ride on Sept.13.

The special event draws hundreds of visitors to the lakeshore communities – last year over 600 riders participated.

For more information about the Lakeshore Harvest Ride go to LHride.com.

Photo provided

The Toast to the Blue Star Trail fundraiser event gathered 150 guests and sponsors at Quiet Creek Farm in Fennville.

South Haven Tribune CLASSIFIEDS

0100 ANNOUNCEMENTS

WE BUY JUNK CARS!
DAMAGED? TOTALED?
BROKEN? NOT RUNNING?
WRECKED?

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0200 EMPLOYMENT

Yuliana Ott seeks a Nanny. Mail resume to 3923 Browntown Rd, Sawyer, MI 49125

0500 MERCHANDISE

MOTORCYCLES & SNOWMOBILES WANTED
$$ CASH PAID $$
ALL MAKES AND MODELS

269-500-1711

0500 MERCHANDISE

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RIDING & COMMERCIAL MOWERS, TRACTORS, ATVS, GOLF CARTS, SCOOTERS, 4X4S, VEHICLES & ALL LAWN EQUIPMENT.

269-500-1711

RESERVE THIS SPACE TODAY!

0900 LEGALS

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN
ALLEGAN AND VAN BUREN COUNTY, MICHIGAN

ORDINANCE NO. 1100

AN ORDINANCE TO ENACT A NEW SECTION 86-26 and AMEND SECTION 86-36 OF THE CODE OF ORDINANCES FOR THE CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN

(The full language of this amendment is on file and available by request at the City Clerk's office, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090)

0900 LEGALS

Meeting Synopsis Casco Township Board Meeting Monday, August 18th, 2025

CALL TO ORDER: -Overhiser called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm and led in The Pledge of Allegiance.
PRESENT: -Overhiser, Clevenger, Campbell & Fleming.
ABSENT: -Clerk Ridley
ITEMS APPROVED: -Denbow Noise Ordinance Variance -Johnston Escrow Release -Opening of bids for garage doors, heater and rubber mats -Upcoming Noise Committee Meeting on Aug. 21st @ 7PM
ADJOURNMENT: 9:19 PM
Allan Overhiser, Casco Supervisor
Rachel Ridley, Casco Clerk

Extra Business is as easy as asking for it!

DO IT HERE, DO IT NOW!

0900 LEGALS

Public Hearing
South Haven Charter Township will host a Public Hearing on Wednesday, September 10th, 2025 at the South Haven Township Hall 09761 Blue Star Highway at 7:30 p.m. For the purpose of establishing the Fire and Ambulance Millage Rate for the 2025 tax year.

JOIN THE READERSHIP. SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

0900 LEGALS

STATE OF MICHIGAN
PROBATE COURT
Van Buren COUNTY

NOTICE TO CREDITORS
Decedent's Estate

Case no. and Judge
2025-1127-DE
Hon. Susan Metzger

Estate of:
James Edward Savage Sr.

TO ALL CREDITORS: *

NOTICE TO CREDITORS:
The decedent, James Edward Savage Sr, died 07/30/2025. Creditors of the decedent are notified that all claims against the estate will be forever barred unless presented to James Savage Jr, personal representative, or to both the probate court at 212 E. Paw Paw St., suite 220 Paw Paw, MI 49079 and the personal representative within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

James Savage Jr.
Personal representative
Kalamazoo, MI 49009
City, state, zip
269-455-9474
Telephone

CASCO TOWNSHIP,
ALLEGAN COUNTY
NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that the Zoning Board of Appeals of Casco Township will conduct a public hearing and regular meeting on Thursday September 11, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. at the Casco Township Hall, 7104 107th Ave, South Haven, MI 49090, within the Township.

PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that the item to be considered at said public hearing include the following:

Bowhead Land Group LLC (William Deary) has petitioned for a variance to exceed the required side wall height for a new residential storage building at 316 Blue Star Hwy 0302-075-010-00. Required side wall 16 feet; Request is for 25 feet side wall height.

PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that the application packet can be reviewed at the Casco Township Hall during regular business hours at 7104 107th Ave, South Haven or by contacting the Zoning Administrator for an electronic copy
1-800-626-5964
mtsallegan@frontier.com

PLEASE TAKE FURTHER NOTICE that written comments may be submitted to the Township Clerk at the Township Hall, by mail, to address below, or email to the zoning administrator mtsallegan@frontier.com. All written comments must be submitted no later than 5:00pm the day preceding the public hearing (Wed September 10, 5pm).

Casco Township will provide necessary reasonable auxiliary aids and services to individuals with disabilities at the hearing upon seven (7) days' notice to the Casco Township Clerk.

Rachel Ridley
Casco Township Clerk
7104 107th Ave,
South Haven MI 49090
269-637-4441

Tasha Smalley
Zoning Administrator
1-800-626-5964

CHARTER TOWNSHIP OF SOUTH HAVEN NOTICE OF ADOPTION OF PROPOSED ORDINANCE NO. 169 AN ORDINANCE TO AMEND RENTAL REGULATIONS IN SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

PLEASE TAKE NOTICE that at its meeting on August 13, 2025, the Charter Township of South Haven adopted Ordinance No. 169, An Ordinance to Amend Rental Regulations in South Haven Charter Township, Michigan (the "Ordinance"). The following is a summary of the Ordinance. A true copy of the Ordinance is available for inspection or purchase at the office of the Township Clerk, 09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI 49090, or online at http://www.southhaventwp.com. The Ordinance takes effect upon publication.

ORDINANCE NO. 169
AN ORDINANCE TO AMEND RENTAL REGULATIONS IN SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

Section 1 amends Section 01-02(d) of the Township's Short Term Rental Regulations Ordinance to exempt rentals in the Community Service Commercial zoning district from the one rental per calendar week requirement.
Section 2 states the Ordinance takes effect once published.
Section 3 makes the Ordinance's provisions severable.
Section 4 repeals all ordinances or parts of ordinances to the extent necessary to give the Ordinance full force and effect.

Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk
South Haven Charter Township
09761 Blue Star Highway
South Haven, MI 49090
269-637-3305

Sell Your

In The Classifieds!

PUBLIC/LEGAL NOTICES

To place a public notice, please send your requests to **legals@pmginmi.com.**

Please allow 48 hours to process, larger legals may need at least four business days.

SOUTH HAVEN CHARTER TOWNSHIP SYNOPSIS
REGULAR MEETING AUGUST 13, 2025

PRESENT: Stein, Poole, Bertorelli, Wiatrowski, Lewandowski, DeGrandchamp and Fisher
Motion to approve July 9, 2025, Regular Meeting Minutes.
Interim Chief Adam DeBoer gave a report for SHPD, Chief Brandon Hinz gave a report for SHAES, Gail Gladney gave a report for VB County.
Motion to approve the Agenda.
Supervisor Stein reported that he has met with developers interested in affordable housing. The Supervisor also reported that Granicus will be up and running soon. Trustee Wiatrowski reported that 37 inspections have been completed on STR and the Clerk reported that she sent information to the attorney for noncompliant homeowners.
Motion to Adopt Resolution 25-19 to Adopt Ordinance #169 an amendment to the STR Ordinance.
Resident Wayne Pecina was in attendance to ask that his property at 09160 M140 be taken out of the 425 Agreement. Motion was made to proceed with an amendment to the 425 to remove this property.
Motion to schedule a Public Hearing for setting the Fire Millage on September 10th at 7:30 p.m.
Motion to accept the Planning Commission's recommendation for a Special Land Use for Sunset Grove Apartments at 08729 M140.
Motion to accept the Planning Commission's recommendation for a Planning Unit Development Rezone on vacant land on 73.5 Street and send documents to the attorney for this map amendment.
Motion to approve Resolution 25-20 Budget Amendments.
Reports were received. W.C.Askew from the Road Commission was in attendance and Jean Stein reported for the library and Diane Rigozzi reported for Senior Services.
Motion to approve payment of bills in the amount of $189,153.09.
Meeting was adjourned at 8:36 p.m.
Respectfully submitted, Brenda Bertorelli, Clerk

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN
Proceedings of the Regular City Council Meeting
Council Chambers, City Hall 7:00 p.m. August 18, 2025

THE FOLLOWING ARE NOT APPROVED MEETING MINUTES

Present: Jeff Arnold, Mary Hosley, Wendi Onuki, Joe Reeser, George Sleeper, Letitia Wilkins, Annie Brown

Absent: None

Call to Order by Mayor Annie Brown at 7:00 p.m.
Moved by Hosley to approve the agenda. Seconded by Arnold. Motion was adopted unanimously.
Public Comment for items on the agenda excluding items scheduled for public hearing was held (Up to 3 minutes).
Moved by Arnold to approve the Consent Agenda items A-C. Seconded by Sleeper. A Roll Call Vote was taken: Yes: Arnold, Hosley, Onuki, Reeser, Sleeper, Wilkins, Brown. No: None.

A. Council will be asked to approve the City Council Regular minutes from August 4, 2025.
B. Council will be asked that invoices totaling $3,112,582.25 for the period ending August 18, 2025, to be approved, and forwarded to the Clerk and Treasurer for payment.
C. Council will be asked to acknowledge the receipt of the following meeting minutes:
a. June 9, 2025, Brownfield Redevelopment Authority Regular Meeting minutes;
b. July 10, 2025 Planning Commission Regular Meeting minutes.

Moved by Arnold to open the public hearing regarding the adoption of a proposed electric utility ordinance. Seconded by Sleeper. Motion was adopted unanimously. Two comments received. Moved by Arnold to close the public hearing. Seconded by Sleeper. Motion was adopted unanimously.
Moved by Arnold to adopt the proposed Electric Utility Ordinance. Seconded by Sleeper. A Roll Call Vote was taken: Yes: Onuki, Reeser, Sleeper, Wilkins, Arnold, Brown. No: Hosley. Motion was adopted.
Moved by Arnold to adopt Resolution 2025-27, a resolution setting electric utility rates. Seconded by Sleeper. A Roll Call Vote was taken: Yes: Onuki, Reeser, Sleeper, Wilkins, Arnold, Hosley, Brown. No: None. Motion was adopted.
Moved by Arnold to approve Special Event Applications 2025-38 Holiday in the Park 2025, 2025-39 New Year's Eve 2025, 2025-40 Pretty Arts & Crafts Festival. Seconded by Hosley. Motion was adopted unanimously.
Moved by Hosley to approve the purchase of one Leaf Collection Truck from MTECH in the amount of $270,395.76 and authorizing staff to execute the necessary documents. Seconded by Sleeper. Motion was adopted unanimously.
Moved by Sleeper to approve Resolution 2025-28, a resolution extending approval for the planned unit development (PUD) for the Center Street/Hale Block Redevelopment Project. Seconded by Reeser. Motion was adopted unanimously.
City Council received an update from Interim Police Chief Adam DeBoer.
Public Comment for items not on the agenda was held (Comments limited to 3 minutes).
City Manager Kate Hosier gave an update on various topics.
Mayor and Councilpersons shared thoughts and comments.
Meeting adjourned by Mayor Brown at 9:32 p.m.

Megan Kiker, City Clerk

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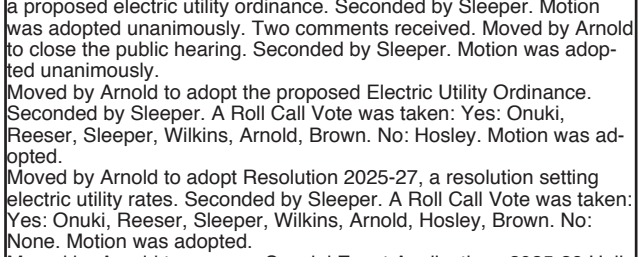
Price Improvement

OPEN HOUSE
Sunday, August 24th | 12:00PM - 2:00PM
660 Lake Street
Saugatuck, MI 49453
2 BD., 1 BA. A beautifully renovated 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom home just 2 blocks from downtown Saugatuck! This charming residence was meticulously and completely renovated in 2023 with a brand new kitchen and bathroom featuring high end finishes, premium appliance, and elegant fixtures. Enjoy peace of mind with all new electrical, plumbing, and HVAC systems. Step outside to your private, deep backyard oasis, professionally landscaped in 2025 with a state-of the-art sprinkler system including garden beds, a driveway and spacious patio. A brand new 2+ car garage will be completed offering ample storage and convenience - never again worry about finding downtown parking! Perfectly situated near Saugatuck's vibrant downtown, you will be steps from charming shops, art galleries, and amazing restaurants.
Listed For: $699,000 MLS#25030666

Hosted By:
Pam Murphy, REALTOR®
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TOWNSHIP OF COVERT
VAN BUREN COUNTY, STATE OF MICHIGAN
NOTICE OF ORDINANCE ADOPTION
SANITARY SEWAGE DISPOSAL FACILITIES RATE AND MANDATORY CONNECTION ORDINANCE

To: THE RESIDENTS AND PROPERTY OWNERS OF COVERT TOWNSHIP AND TO ALL OTHER INTERESTED PERSONS:
The following is a summary of Ordinance No. 128 adopted by the Covert Township Board at a regular meeting on Tuesday, August 12, 2025, said ordinance to take effect 30 days following the date of this publication. This ordinance repeals and replaces Ord. No. 24, eff. Jan. 2, 1989, revised by Ord. No. 94, eff. May 21, 2017; & Ord. No. 26 eff. Sept 14, 1989, revised March 14, 2014.

ARTICLE I
TITLE AND PURPOSE

SECTION 1.1 SHORT TITLE. The title of the ordinance is the "Covert Sanitary Connection Ordinance."
SECTION 1.2 PUBLIC UTILITY RATES BASIS. This section provides that sewer utility rates are required to operate a public utility as authorized by law.

ARTICLE II
DEFINITIONS

SECTION 2.1 DEFINITIONS. This section defines the terms used in the Ordinance.

ARTICLE III
USE OF PUBLIC SEWERS REQUIRED

SECTION 3.1 DEPOSIT OF SEWAGE OR WASTES UPON PULIC OR PRIVATE PROPERTY. This section provides that no unsanitary sewage or waste shall be allowed on public or private property within the District.
SECTION 3.2 POLLUTED DISCHARGES TO NATURAL OUTLET. No discharge to any Natural Outlet within the District or other waters unless suitable treatment is provided in accordance with law.
SECTION 3.3 FACILITIES CONSTRUCTION OR MAINTAINED BY PERSON. This section provides that no person shall construct or maintain any sewage disposal facilities within the District unless authorized by this Ordinance
SECTION 3.4 CONNECTION REQUIREMENTS & TIME LIMIT FOR CONNECTION. Sub-paragraph "A" provides when mandatory connection is required. Sub-paragraph "B" provides timelines for when connection must be completed and provides a civil penalty for a violation.
SECTION 3.5 SERVICE PLATS. This section provides when Public Sewer is required for plats.
SECTION 3.6 FAILURE TO CONNECT. This section provides that the Township may seek injunctive relief or other relief when a Person fails to connect to Public Sewer.

ARTICLE IV
PRIVATE SEWAGE DISPOSAL

SECTION 4.1 PUBLIC SEWER NOT AVAILABLE. This section provides when a connection is required when Public Sewer is not available to a parcel within the District.
SECTION 4.2 OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE OF FACILITIES. This section requires the owner to operate and maintain private Sewage Disposal Systems at their cost.
SECTION 4.3 ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS. This Ordinance does not interfere with any additional requirements within the District.
SECTION 4.4 WHEN PULIC SEWER BECOMES AVAILABLE. This section provides connection guidance for connection when sewer because within available within the District.

ARTICLE V
BUILDING SEWERS AND CONNECTIONS

SECTION 5.1 PERMIT REQUIREMENT. This section requires a permit be issued before connecting to the Public Sewer.
SECTION 5.2 PERMIT APPLICATION. This section provides a permit application process to the Township
SECTION 5.3 APPROVAL OF APPLICATION. This section provides permit application standards.
SECTION 5.4 EXCAVATIONS, PIPE LAYING, AND BACKFILL. Any excavation must be approved by the Township and is subject to inspection.
SECTION 5.5 CONNECTION TO PUBLIC SEWER. This section provides that owners are responsible for certain costs of connection.
SECTION 5.6 CONNECTION OF SURFACE RUNOFF OR GROUND WATER. This section prohibits surface runoff or groundwater runoff from being directed to a building sewer or building drain if the same is connected directly or indirectly to the public sewer.
SECTION 5.7 EXCAVATIONS. This section provides that all excavations for installation and connection are guarded to protect from hazards.
SECTION 5.8 COST OF INSTALLATION AND CONNECTIONS; INDEMNIFICATION. This section provides that all costs are borne by the owner; the owner shall indemnify the Township from damages based by the installation and connection.
SECTION 5.9 INSPECTION. This section specifies when inspections are required.
SECTION 5.10 COST OF REPAIRS, ETC. TO EXISTING BUILDING SEWERS. This section provides that costs of repairs/operations, etc. are bore by the property owner.
SECTION 5.11 COSTS OF REPAIRS, ETC. TO THE SYSTEM. This section provides that costs of repairs, operation, maintenance, to the System are bore by the Township, subject to fees as provided in this Ordinance.

ARTICLE VI
USE OF PUBLIC SEWERS

SECTION 6.1 UNPOLLUTED DISCHARGES TO THE PUBLIC SEWER. Discharge into the public sewer is prohibited.
SECTION 6.2 UNPOLLUTED DRAINAGE. Stormwater and other drainage shall be discharged to the ground surface or other approved natural outlet.
SECTION 6.3 PROHIBITED DISCHARGE. This section specifies discharge that cannot be made into any Public Sewer.
SECTION 6.4 WASTES WHICH COULD CAUSE EFFLUENT TO EXCEED DISCHARGE LIMITS. This section prohibits the discharge that would case effluent from the Sewage Treatment Facility to exceed discharge limitations.
SECTION 6.5 TOWNSHIP ACTION TO PREVENT HAZARD OR NUISANCE. This section provides that no discharge shall exceed limitations as provided in the permit issued by the Township.
SECTION 6.6 PRELIMINARY TREATMENT OR FLOW EQUALIZING FACILITIES. The Township may take specified actions necessary to eliminate harmful effects upon the Sewage Works or the Sewage Treatment Facility.
SECTION 6.7 SPECIAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN TOWNSHIP AND INDUSTRIAL USER. Nothing in this Article prevents the Township from entering into a special agreement/arraignment for industrial users who have industrial wastes of unusual strength or character.
SECTION 6.8 SPECIAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN TOWNSHIP AND OTHER MUNICIPALITY. Nothing in the Article prevents the Township from entering into an agreement with another municipality for the treatment of wastewater from such other municipality.
SECTION 6.9 INTERCEPTORS. Specifies when an interceptor may be required and sets requirements for interceptors.
SECTION 6.10 CONTROL MANHOLE. Provides that the Township can require that an industrial user installs a suitable control manhole in the building sewer. Provides certain standards for the same.
SECTION 6.11 MEASUREMENTS, TESTS AND ANALYSIS. States that all measurements, tests and analyses of characteristics of industrial wastes shall be conducted on samples obtained at the control manhole; and provides an alternative where no control manhole exists.
SECTION 6.12 DETERMINING SEWAGE OR WASTE CHARACTERISTICS. All measurements, test, and analyses of Sewage or Waste characteristics described in this Article shall be determined in accordance with the current "Standard Methods for the Examination of Water and Sewage," as published by the American Public Health Association.

ARTICLE VII
SEWER RATES AND CHARGES

SECTION 7.1 OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE. The operation and maintenance of the sanitary sewer system is under the control and maintenance of the Township, and the Township may set rates and charges for sewer collection and disposal.
SECTION 7.2 RATES, CHARGES AND ENFORCEMENT. Provides for the types of sewer charges and the amount of such charges; and for enforcement for failure to pay the charges set herein.
SECTION 7.3 NO FREE SERVICE. Nobody shall receive free public sewer services.
SECTION 7.4 ADMINISTRATION AND OPERATION EXPENSES. Sewer rates shall be set by the Township Board in an amount sufficient for the operation of the sanitary sewer system.
SECTION 7.5 OPERATING YEAR. The operating year shall commence on July 1 and end on the last day of June the following year.
SECTION 7.6 REVENUES. The revenues of the system shall be retained in a designated "sewer fund"; and provides sub-categories for different expenditures from the sewer fund.
SECTION 7.7 INSUFFICIENT FUNDS. If the money available in the sewer fund is insufficient to provide for operation and maintenance, funds from the other sub-categories created in section 7.6 may be used to cover any deficit.
SECTION 7.8 INVESTMENT FUNDS. Money from the sewer fund may be invested subject to the limitations provided in Act 94, Public Acts of Michigan, 1933, as amended.
SECTION 7.9 HARDSHIP APPLICATION. Provides for a deferment of part of or all of the connection charge subject to regulations contained in this section.
SECTION 7.10 MISCELLANEOUS CUSTOMER FEE. The Township can impose miscellaneous fees from time to time for miscellaneous service, repairs and related administrative costs associated with the System and incurred, without limitation, as a result of the intentional or negligent acts of such User or Users.
SECTION 7.11 INSPECTION FEE. The Township shall set the inspection fee; such fee shall not be more than the actual cost of the inspector.
SECTION 7.12 BILLING. Bills for sewer rates and charges shall be mailed to users before the 10th day of the first month of the quarterly billing period; and shall be due on or before the 1st day of the second month of the quarterly billing period.
SECTION 7.13 OUTSTANDING BALANCE. If Sewer Rates and Charges are not paid on or before the due date, then a $10 late fee shall be charged, unless revised by Township Board resolution.
SECTION 7.14 UNPAID CHARGES. Provides enforcement mechanisms for the Township if sewer charges remain unpaid after the due date set forth in this Article.

ARTICLE VIII
POWERS AND AUTHORITY OF INSPECTORS

SECTION 8.1 POWER AND AUTHORITY OF INSPECTORS. Sets forth that certain Township personnel and agents of the Township may enter properties connected to the sanitary sewer system for the purpose of inspection, observation, measurement, sampling, testing and emergency repairs in accordance with the provisions of this Ordinance.

ARTICLE IX
PENALTIES

SECTION 9.1 WILLFUL DAMAGE TO SYSTEM. Provides that no unauthorized person shall maliciously, willfully, or negligently break, damage, destroy, uncover, deface, or tamper with, climb upon, or enter into any structure, appurtenance, or equipment of the System, including the Sewage Treatment Facility or connect or disconnect any Building Sewer to the System.
SECTION 9.2 NOTICE. If any person is in violation of any part of this Ordinance, the Township shall provide written notice of the violation and a timeline for remediation.
SECTION 9.3 PENALTY. A violation of this Ordinance is a municipal civil infraction; sets forth the table of fines; and provides that a violation is a public nuisance; and each day a violation occurs is a separate offense.
SECTION 9.4 NUISANCE PER SE. A violation of this Ordinance is a nuisance per se.
SECTION 9.5 LIABILITY. A person who violates this Ordinance is responsible for all Township costs and expenses incurred by the Township by reason of such violation.
SECTION 9.6 REMEDIES CUMULATIVE. The remedies provided by this Ordinance shall be deemed to be cumulative and not mutually exclusive.

ARTICLE X
VALIDITY

SECTION 10.1 REPEAL. Conflicting ordinances are repealed. This Ordinance specifically repeals the following ordinances in their entirety: Ord. No. 24, eff. Jan. 2, 1989, revised by Ord. No. 94, eff. May 21, 2017; & Ord. No. 26 eff. Sept 14, 1989, revised March 14, 2014.
SECTION 10.2 SEVERABILITY. The provisions of this Ordinance are severable. Any cases currently pending under an ordinance that is repealed by this Ordinance may still proceed.
SECTION 10.3 CONFLICT. All ordinances, resolutions, or orders, or parts thereof, in conflict with the provisions of this Ordinance are, to the extent of such conflict, hereby repealed.
SECTION 10.4 PUBLICATION. This Ordinance shall be published in a newspaper of general circulation in the Township.
SECTION 11 EFFECTIVE DATE. This Ordinance shall take effect 30 days after publication following adoption.
Please take further notice that a copy of the Ordinance can be examined or obtained by contacting the Township Clerk at the address and telephone number provided below.

Wende Pritchard, Clerk, Covert Township
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SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "Altered Consumerism" exhibition from Aug. 8 through Sept. 20.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays starting Sept. 2.

South Haven Farm Market: Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. through October. Wednesdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. June through August at Huron Street Pavilion.

Daydreamer Domes: Local community pool day every Tuesday at 11 a.m.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lake Arvesta: Summer at the pasture concert every Friday and Saturday at 6 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: Storywalk "Fly, Butterfly" by Bonnie Bader from Aug. 1 through 31.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: New Exhibit – "The Adventures of Liberty Hyde Bailey – Chicago: 1872." Available during museum hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Fish Tales Story Time at 11 a.m. on Mondays through August.

August

26 – Tennis: Boys varsity game against Three Rivers at 4 p.m.

26 – Cross Country: Southwest Michigan Rust Buster. Middle school boys and girls at 4 p.m. and varsity boys and girls at 5 p.m. at Warner Camp.

26 – Soccer: Boys junior varsity game against Allegan Public Schools at 5 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

27 – First Congregational UCC: Open Mic Night at 6 p.m.

27 – Volleyball: Girls junior varsity game against Constantine High School at 5:30 p.m.

27 – Volleyball: Girls freshman game against Hackett Catholic Prep at 5:30 p.m.

27 – Soccer: Boys varsity game against Allegan Public Schools at 6:30 p.m. at Ratcliffe Field.

27 – Volleyball: Girls varsity game against Constantine High School at 6:30 p.m.

28 – Riverfront Concert Series: Zion Lion, Kalamazoo's premier reggae band at 7 p.m. at the Municipal Marina lawn.

28 – Football: Boys varsity game against Dowagiac High School at 7 p.m.

30-31 – All Crafts Fair: from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m on Saturday and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday at Stanley Johnston Park.

September

3 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

4 – Football: Boy junior varsity game against Holland Public Schools at 6 p.m.

4-7 – Michigan Flywheelers Museum: Antique Engine and Tractor Show. Gates open at 8 a.m. Admission is $10 per person. Children 12 years old and under are free with paid admission.

8 – Golf: SAC Lakeshore Jam, girls varsity at 4 p.m. at Hawkshead.

8 – Paw Paw Community Chorus: Christman Concert practice begins at 7 p.m. at First Presbyterian Church in Paw Paw.

8 – Stellar Steppers: Sunrise to Sunset Walk along the Kal-Haven Trail.

9 – Swimming: Girls varsity against Harper Creek High School at 6 p.m.

9 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Strummers ukulele event for all ages from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

MEALS

From page A1

district qualifies for federal aid.

"We do not anticipate any impact on our ability to provide free meals to students if the proposed statewide free meals program does not pass," Tabbert said in a shared statement to The Herald-Palladium. "BHAS has participated in a national program granting free meals to all students in our district called the Community Eligibility Program (CEP), which has been in existence prior to the state program."

Coloma Community Schools is among the districts continuing to watch developments in Lansing closely.

Superintendent David Ehlers said he expects no immediate impact next month, but some decisions will have to be made if the situation isn't resolved by Oct. 1.

When asked how he sees the situation shaping up, Ehlers responded, "I wish I could answer that question with certainty. Thankfully, we have a modest fund equity, and state aid payments for 2025-26 do not start until October. We are definitely good for the first month."

Between the Democratic-controlled state Senate and Republican-controlled state House, the state Legislature has failed to agree on how to fund K-12 education. Negotiations have been further complicated by competing priorities, such as how to fund roads and universal free school lunches, among other things.

"My guess is – we will have to borrow more money for cash flow purposes than we usually do, which will cost more in interest payments," Ehlers told the Coloma school board in its recent meeting. "We try to keep the amount low, and our fund equity allows us to do that. This year, we may need to borrow more, to make sure we can sustain operations, should there not be a budget by Oct. 1."

According to Congress.gov, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is an option within the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) designed to allow high-poverty schools to serve free meals to all students without collecting household applications.

The qualifier is that each school or district must have at least 40 percent of their student body eligible for SNAP funding.

"The provision was intended to increase access to and participation in free school meals, reduce paperwork for schools and families by eliminating applications for meals and remove stigmas that free- and reduced-price meal recipients may face in the cafeteria," the Congress.gov site stated.

'A triple whammy'

In The Detroit News article, state Superintendent Michael Rice recommended districts stay the course and continue to provide free meals to students until the program ends on Sept. 30.

The Michigan Department of Education also shared income guidelines for applying for free/reduced cost school meals last week.

Hoppstock said adding the expense of school meals could also affect household budgets.

"It would be one thing for a parent to say 'I know we're struggling, but at least I know the kid's going to get a good breakfast and a good lunch. Maybe not dinner every night,'" he said. "But if the schools start to tighten up and can't meet that, and the parent can't meet that, you can see it becomes a double, triple whammy."

Hoppstock estimated that 25-30 percent of kids in Berrien County are food insecure – not entirely without food, but missing meals sometimes. It's hard to focus on classwork "when you're worried about your growling stomach."

The rates for school meals in the county were officially set this week, as they are every year. The rates are as follows:

- Breakfast will be $2.20 (full) or $0.40 (reduced)
- Lunch will be $3.20 (full) or $0.40 (reduced)

For one student who does not qualify for free or reduced lunch prices through SNAP or Medicaid, the cost of paying for full-price lunch and breakfast every day for an entire school year would be about $1,000. The reduced-price rate would be about $80.

"You can see the impact of those," Hoppstock said. "We're going ahead and setting those rates, crossing our fingers that that funding holds. Even at a reduced rate, that helps a family dramatically."

These meal rates would go into effect again for the first time in a few years if MSM does not receive funding in this year's School Aid Plan.

Hoppstock recommended people share their concerns with their lawmakers.

"We're going to provide meals the best we can, but we are somewhat held hostage to the state budget," he said. "So if you have the opportunity to give your opinion to your legislator, tell them that story. Tell them that 'while you guys are dilly-dallying trying to make a decision, my kid is going hungry.' Those are the kind of stories that motivate legislators to make decisions, to change things."

He said the best case scenario is schools receive the funding the way they did last year, because getting more isn't realistic.

"We're not asking for a great infusion of cash, but if you can at least hold level what we had last year, that will help us fill in the cracks, because then we can make up the differences," Hoppstock said. "But if you cut it out altogether, if the state doesn't have the ability to make up what the feds are doing, the local districts don't have the ability to make up what would be lost from the state."

HP Correspondent Ralph Heibutzki contributed to this article.

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FOCUS

Is *'Singapore math'* a better way to teach the subject?

By RACQUEL BAZOS
The Baltimore Sun (TNS)

BALTIMORE — Imagine you're a character in a math problem. You have three platters, but two cakes. All three platters need to have the same amount of cake. How would you split it?

Without even saying the word "divide," a group of about 20 teachers from private schools spanning Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia, stacked cubes and folded notecards to find solutions. The answer? Two-thirds of cake per platter. But the problem doesn't end there.

During this training in "Singapore math" – teaching methods and curricula developed in Singapore, which has consistently led the world in student math performance – Math Champions founder Cassy Turner then asked the teachers explain why they did what they did, before moving on to the next question.

Owings Mills K-12 girls' school, Garrison Forest School, hosted the two-day public workshop recently on this style of teaching math. After seeing success adopting Singapore math for its lower school over the past two years, Garrison is expanding the curriculum through eighth grade this year.

Other Maryland schools – private, charter and public – have also incorporated the teaching style into their curricula in the hopes of emulating Singapore's three decades of success.

Singapore math was developed by that Southeast Asian country's Ministry of Education decades ago. It is a teaching style that avoids rote memorization and focuses on a slower learning approach to teach mathematical concepts, allowing students to understand them in greater detail.

At the kindergarten level, that means not introducing the plus or minus symbols until the end of the year, U.S. Singapore math textbook consultant Susan Resnick said. Instead, students can spend their time telling stories with numbers to decode the relationship between them. For example, after looking at a picture, a student might say, "There are four boys in the picture and one girl. Four and one make five."

Research has found that students learn math best when mixing in physical objects like counting chips and blocks with drawings and in-depth discussion, said Pat Campbell, retired professor emerita at the University of Maryland's Center for Mathematics Education. Singapore math teaches concepts beginning with concrete materials, then progresses to pictures and then brings students to abstract symbols like the plus or minus sign.

Lloyd Fox / TNS

Cassy Turner, left, and Susan Resnick, work with teachers at a two-day workshop on the Singaporean method of math instruction being held at the Garrison Forest School in Owings Mills, Maryland.

Older children's class discussions go over three or four different methods the students used to solve a problem, always ending on the one closest to the day's goal, Turner said.

Singapore math's portrayal of numerical relationships is particularly "clever," especially in how it uses drawn bars to help students visualize relationships, Campbell said.

Memorization doesn't work well

On international measures of math performance, Singapore has consistently been a top scorer since the mid-1990s. Seeing those high scores spurred American textbook publishers to localize Singaporean math materials for U.S. classrooms, according to Campbell.

But at the core of Singapore math is problem-solving, Resnick said.

"Where we grew up, maybe thinking that calculation was the goal of mathematics … they teach calculation as a support to get to problem-solving," she said.

Singapore teaches students starting with attitudes and thought processes, Resnick explained to the teachers, whereas American math education usually gets bogged down in the skills and concepts.

Developing a conceptual understanding of math from the ground up isn't unique to Singapore math – it's "something that people in math education have been espousing for many years, but it requires professional development on the part of teachers," Campbell said.

Contrast Singapore math with what Campbell called "a show-and-tell model" of math instruction "where somebody shows you how to solve a problem and you practice doing it over and over and over again, with a reliance on memory."

"We actually know that doesn't work very well if you look at the product of kids' achievement," she said.

Getting American kids to love math

By fourth grade, Turner said, kids know if they like math or not. They're more aware of their peers and can get embarrassed by their answers.

"They won't ask questions, they won't raise their hand, and so they fall further and further behind," she said. But Singapore math can make the subject students' third favorite behind P.E. and lunch, Turner said.

At Garrison, all three divisions previously used a different textbook program. Extending Singapore math through middle school means students only have to transition to upper school math, said Sydney Carter, the middle school's dean and a sixth-grade math teacher.

Strategies, like drawing bar models that students learn early on, can be used to scaffold on more advanced concepts like ratios, Carter said. "That helps them feel like, 'Oh, I can access this sort of.'"

That confidence is translating to results for Garrison's students. The majority of K-5 students showed more than a year's worth of growth in math on Measures of Academic Progress assessments taken last school year, according to Shannon Schmidt, director of Garrison's Boyce Center for Learning and Thriving.

Top scores for Singapore's students

The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds, showed "some 41 percent of students in Singapore were top performers in mathematics." The United States had 7 percent top performers in math.

Even taking top performers out of the equation, Singaporean students still had an edge over their American counterparts: 92 percent of Singaporean students attained at least Level 2 proficiency in mathematics; the U.S. has 66 percent reaching at least Level 2.

The trend holds for younger students too. On the 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which tests fourth- and eighth-graders in those subjects, Singapore had international top scores for both grades, while the U.S. had around average scores at both levels.

But Singaporean students are also highly creative. On the 2022 PISA creative thinking assessment, 58 percent of 15-year-olds were considered top performers on the evaluation, more than 30 percentage points above the average for the 38 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The U.S. did not participate in the creativity assessment.

The difference in math instruction isn't the only difference between the two countries' education systems, though. Singapore has a national math curriculum. The government produces the educational materials. All teachers across the country teach the same math concepts the same way, Campbell explained.

In the United States, by contrast, student-teachers rarely get intensive instruction on how to teach math. Throughout her experience training teachers across the country, Resnick said it's typical for student-teachers without advanced degrees in math to get one class in math education and four or five in reading.

"We don't teach our elementary teachers how to teach mathematics. We just don't, and that's why it's necessary for people to have outside … professional development around the teaching method," Resnick said.

Varied methods in the U.S.

Additionally, U.S., state, and local jurisdictions, as well as individual teachers, have far greater control over curriculum and teaching methods than they do in Singapore, Campbell said.

Although some math curricula in Maryland do emphasize the concrete models and strategy discussions, Campbell said, the professional development teachers receive and the instructional models they use vary.

Howard and Montgomery counties support students' conceptual understanding of math, she said. Howard County had the state's highest percentage of students proficient in math for the 2023-2024 school year, as measured by MCAP scores: 41.1 percent. Montgomery County came in fourth with 33.4 percent.

The state adopted new math standards recently. The update follows Maryland's adoption of Common Core Standards in 2010 and the updated College and Career Readiness Standards in 2013 and 2014.

All school districts are required to align their curriculum to the College and Career Readiness math standards, Cherie Duvall-Jones, spokesperson for the Maryland State Department of Education, said when asked if a public school district could use a Singapore math curriculum.

"If you really want to address student achievement across schools, you need to have the school as the unit of change. All the teachers have to be essentially in the same approach to teaching mathematics," Campbell said.

"Everybody can be good at math. It's a matter of how you're taught."

Eoneren / Getty Images

FOCUS

gmast3r / Getty Images

They're here. They're queer. They're farming.

New generation of LGBTQ farmers more visible

By NARA SCHOENBERG
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — Laid off by a bar during the COVID pandemic, Jarvi Schneider turned to the internet for job leads.

The Chicago Botanic Garden was offering a training program for would-be farmers that included paid, hands-on experience, and Schneider signed up. That led to a business class and four years growing vegetables at a shared plot in Bronzeville.

Now Schneider, who is transgender and uses they/them pronouns, is taking the next step with their spouse, Soraya Alem.

The couple is leasing a 43-acre farm in McHenry County, with the intention to buy.

"Unlike a regular job that you go to, where maybe it's not what you want to be doing, it's rewarding to have a spiritual and emotional connection to what you're doing," Schneider, 36, said of farming. "And then it's also it's your business, and you're in charge of it."

Schneider and Alem are part of a new wave of LGBTQ farmers who are more visible and better organized than previous generations, with "convergences" – or regional grassroots gatherings, support resources such as the Queer Farmer Network and farm websites that include the owners' LGBTQ identities.

The Department of Agriculture's census of farmers and ranchers doesn't track gender or sexual orientation, so data is very limited. But enterprising researchers crunched the agriculture census numbers for two-person farms and found that 1.2 percent of those farmers were in same-sex marriages.

That equates to about 24,000 LGBTQ farmers in the U.S. And that number is likely a big undercount because the findings, published in 2020 in the journal Society & Natural Resources, don't include LGBTQ farmers who aren't married, aren't living on two-person farms, aren't married to the person they farm with or are transgender or gender nonbinary.

The only large U.S. survey, by the National Young Farmers Coalition, found that 24 percent of farmers age 40 and under don't identify as heterosexual, and 64 percent say they are not cisgender males.

That survey of 3,300 farmers included participants reached through various organizations, and the findings may not be representative of farming as a whole. Still, the large numbers are in keeping with anecdotal reports from progressive places such as Chicago and Austin, Texas.

"It feels like there are so many more queer farmers," said Chicago-area farmer Fresh Roberson, using the younger generations' preferred term for LGBTQ.

Roberson, who is queer and owns Fresher Together, a collaborative food and farming project in Beaverville, said it's hard to know if there has been an actual numerical increase, or if queer farmers are just more visible, due to factors such as the rise of the internet.

Either way, Roberson, 42, has noticed a big uptick, even in just the past seven years.

Making the leap

Queer farmers – and young farmers in general – often don't come from established farm families that pass down big plots of land from generation to generation.

Instead, they discover farming on their own, while navigating an industry that tends to be white, male and socially conservative. The American Farm Bureau, for instance, still defines family to include only blood relationships, legal adoption and "marriage between male and female."

Schneider and Alem were already interested in sustainably grown food and how to make it accessible to more people when Schneider began their farm training program.

In addition, both had childhood experiences at their grandparents' hobby farms: Schneider's grandfather had a horse ranch and vegetable farm in Michigan, and Alem's grandmother grew corn, tomatoes and cucumbers in Louisiana.

"We have the same passion for growing food and being outside, and the importance of getting in the dirt and connecting to the earth," Alem said.

Schneider's training at the Botanic Garden's Windy City Harvest apprenticeship program played a big role in their journey, allowing Schneider to get hands-on work experience.

"It was cool through the apprenticeship to see a couple of rounds of produce that I had either grown or our class had grown from start to finish," Schneider said. "It just always seemed (that) to operate that way, you needed a big team, you needed to have all these tools, and you had to have all this space. (But) you can actually do this with less space and you don't need all the tools and resources."

Scheider and Alem never thought they would be able to own a farm – the financial hurdles were just too great. But Schneider had a knack for the work, and was drawn to the idea of running their own business.

The couple both took a business class after Schneider's apprenticeship – and then took the leap to farming at Windy City's incubator farm in Bronzeville. Their farm, Otter Oaks, is named for Schneider's grandfather's ranch.

"It's been a learning process every year," Alem said with a laugh.

"We don't have employees. We're doing the labor, on top of running the business, and on top of having other jobs," Schneider said.

"Fortunately, Windy City has so many resources that have allowed us to figure all this out – inch by inch," Alem said.

Roberson, who grew up in North Carolina and came to Chicago to attend college, also had family roots in farming: maternal grandparents who were sharecroppers growing tobacco, cotton and peanuts.

"I often say I feel like there is something ancestral that is calling me back to the land, that I don't quite understand," said Roberson, who uses they/them and she/her pronouns.

Growing up in a small town surrounded by farmland, Roberson said they had access to sweet potatoes harvested from a local field, and greens bought from a truck that would pull up in a parking lot.

There were many steps on their long road from studying engineering and physics at Northwestern University, to culinary school, to full-time farming, but a big moment came when Roberson was a first-year college student.

Roberson went to the store to buy pecans for pecan pie, but couldn't afford them.

"I was like, 'What?'" they said. Back home, their aunt had a pecan tree next to her house. "I didn't realize how expensive this thing was – or how inaccessible."

As a chef Roberson made sure that they worked at restaurants where they could afford to eat, and today their customers include a local food bank.

Targeted by Trump

Farming is a tough business, with many farmers in the Young Farmers survey reporting barriers such as lack of access to land or capital and high health care costs.

And LGBTQ people can face additional problems, including discrimination and social isolation, research indicates.

President Donald Trump has added to the pressure on queer people in general by insisting that there are only two genders, and attempting to block gender-affirming health care for transgender teens.

In March, Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins brandished two triumphant scissor emojis on X in a post saying her department had terminated a $361,000 grant in New York City to support queer and transgender farmers and urban consumers.

Chicago-area farmers, including Schneider and Alem, were directly affected by the Trump administration's attempt to freeze funding for the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program, which increases profits for small farmers and provides fresh produce to communities in need.

Schneider and Alem were set to participate in the program for the whole season, Schneider said. Then, all of a sudden, the funding stopped: "That was really scary."

Some farmers did get money again for a short period, Schneider said, and recently there was more good news: The money would be back until Sept. 30.

Schneider and Alem figured out how to keep selling their produce, although for less money than they had planned. Alem said they were heartened by the way small farmers worked together, sharing strategies and solutions.

"We've all been doing this for years, and we're not going to just stop," Alem said.

Being in Chicago has shielded the couple from outright discrimination, but there are times when they are clearly in the minority as farmers.

"I think as queer people – and I'm trans – you're around a lot of people who aren't those things and sometimes it's fine, it doesn't really matter, and other times you can feel like you're in a really traditional setting and it's like, 'Is it worth talking about this? Is it work bringing this up?'" Schneider said.

"For me, usually not – unless I'm in the company of people that are comfortable," they said. "There are not many queer people who own their own farms, and there are even less trans people."

Roberson has also noticed some self-censoring, in their case regarding clothing choices.

"I might not go into my USDA office as this Black, fat, queer person in my Dyke March shirt and sit down and talk. … Maybe they're cool, but I'm in Iroquois County. I don't know," they said.

Studies indicate that many queer farmers anticipate discrimination, and that fear of discrimination itself can have a real impact on peoples' lives.

Michaela Hoffelmeyer, an assistant professor of public engagement in agriculture at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, recalled interviewing early-career queer farmers who worried that valuable internships and apprenticeships would place them in hostile work environments or unsafe communities.

Queer farmers may also be forgoing good farmland because they want to avoid harassment, Hoffelmeyer said.

Paying it forward

Alem and Schneider arrived at their farm plot in Bronzeville in broad-brimmed hats and sturdy boots, ready to harvest zucchini and cucumber under a blazing summer sun.

Schneider's enthusiasm was infectious as they delved into the specifics of mushroom cultivation, brushed aside the notion that farming is particularly hard work and jumped up to rescue a dragonfly from a puddle.

Alem cheerfully described working a full-time job in digital publishing, but still managing to farm on some evenings and early mornings – and all day on Saturdays.

"For me, it's really fun to do something so productive," Alem said of farming. "It's the most productive thing I do."

Asked about the future of queer farming, Schneider was similarly upbeat.

"In 10 years, if I had to guess, they'll probably be a lot more queer folks who are farming and living sustainably, even if they don't own their own farm," they said. "It just seems that that is really popular."

The couple hope to help pave the way at their new farm in McHenry County. They want to host music events and workshops, renovate an old dairy barn so guests can stay there, and launch a farm incubator project, with space and support for early-career farmers.

"We really want to help people find their own journey with farming," Alem said.

Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune / TNS

Jon Gottlieb rides his bicycle through his North Side neighborhood in Chicago, Aug. 1, 2025. Gottlieb hit the 115,000 miles last week, which was a lifetime goal.

As last baby boomers reach *retirement*, they tackle a quest for *fulfillment*

By SOPHIE LEVENSON
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — Forty-two stories above ground, Jon Gottlieb traced his bicycle route. From his vantage point by the pool, on his building's roof, he could see the stop sign where he turns right, the road he hates crossing, the park he rides through and the tunnel that leads to the Lakefront Trail bike path.

Gottlieb, 75, rode this route at least five times a week through the 13 years since he moved into the Lincoln Park building, the tail end of a five-decade commitment to cycling. For half a century, the retired railroad services manager tracked his mileage on bicycles and compiled it in a spreadsheet. Mark Mattei, who serviced Gottlieb's bikes for 36 years, said it was clear that Gottlieb was honest about his mileage.

In 2020, he passed 100,000 miles on his bike. In 2023, he hit 110,000. Last week, Gottlieb prepared for two-wheel retirement as he geared up to ride his 115,000th mile. He reached his final threshold Friday.

"You gotta quit somewhere," he said.

With his serious cycling days behind him, Gottlieb faces a life unstructured by a goal. He's retired, happily married and financially comfortable. But like others on the older side of the baby boomer generation, he's not quite sure how to spend his days without reaching toward something.

Some experts say that Americans tend to identify themselves with their careers, which leaves them feeling lost in retirement. Others, though, have found that baby boomers, especially the younger ones, are much better at finding fulfillment outside work than their parents were. As the last of the baby boomers reach retirement age, they have to manage more than financial stability – they're figuring out what fulfillment looks like.

The baby boomer generation was born in what Gottlieb called "the backwash of the Second World War," or the years 1946 through 1964. According to the Alliance for Lifetime Income, the United States is facing its greatest "retirement surge" ever, as more than 11,000 Americans turn 65 every day. For people who can afford to retire, and aren't burdened by serious health issues, rebuilding a routine is usually the toughest challenge retirement offers.

"There's a lot of detriment when the structure that you normally have gotten from your occupation is no longer there, and it's kind of that rug being pulled out from underneath you," said Michael Wolf, a professor at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine who researches aging.

For people who connect their identities to their jobs, Wolf said, retirement is gutting, as they experience a loss of identity and self worth. The happier retirees Wolf sees in his work are typically those who figure out what brings them joy ahead of retirement.

"You need to be able to not think of retirement as something like going cold turkey from work," Wolf said. "You need to envision it as a staged process."

'Desire to find a balance'

Stacks of vintage toys block nearly every window on the first floor of Mattei's house in Lincoln Park. Two wooden chairs are the only furniture on the floor, unless you count the dozens of display cases filled with toy cars. Hundreds of them flood each room, some in every color, stacked on top of each other on shelves, in old paper boxes or standing alone. Model boats and airplanes squeeze between shelves and shelves of tiny cars; a glow-in-the-dark pirate ship perches in a corner; one-of-a-kind paintings of model planes crowd the ceiling.

Mattei, 74, closed Cycle Smithy, the bicycle store and repair shop he owned for 49 years, in 2022 – to Gottlieb's dismay. Mattei had worked seven days a week for the better part of half a century, reached the age of 71, and could afford to retire – so he did. He took everything down, swept the floors and left the large storefront exactly the way he had found it years before. To his surprise, Mattei was calm.

"I was worried about retiring because I thought I would have some sort of existential crisis," he said, three years into retirement. "That wasn't a problem at all."

Though he liked Cycle Smithy, Mattei found himself far less stressed once the shop was closed. These days, he sometimes has dreams about horrible customers at work and wakes up relieved that he doesn't have to face his job anymore.

"I find happiness in the freedom to do whatever I want, even if I don't really do anything," Mattei said.

Mattei doesn't feel aimless as he climbs into his mid-70s; he still has goals, even if they've changed. He's focused on preparing for the end of his life. In January, he started selling from his vintage collection. In the next three years, he would like to have sold almost all of it, at market prices to genuinely interested buyers. He doesn't want to die and leave his wife with a floor's worth of stuff to clear out, but it's important to Mattei that the items he holds dear end up in the right hands.

Through the selling process, he's met other dedicated collectors of vintage toys. Some will fly in from California or Florida to see his collection and spend several hours with Mattei. That, and the other friendships he maintains – often with old employees at Cycle Smithy – keeps Mattei feeling fulfilled.

George Mannes, executive editor of the AARP magazine, is surrounded by people like Mattei, who have redefined what purpose looks like after ending their careers. At 62, Mannes is on the tail end of the baby boomer generation, with many of his friends and colleagues in the early stages of retirement.

Mannes has found that people his age are much better at handling retirement than their parents. Retirees in their 60s, Mannes said, have built identities less associated with their careers. Many of them find fulfillment in volunteer work or artistic outlets: Mannes has a friend who organizes a trash clean up club and another who is learning the art of ceramics. The latter isn't quite retired, but identifying her passion ahead of time – like Wolf recommended – has made her feel optimistic about leaving work soon.

"I am finding, among the people I know right now, that they're very happy to walk away from (work), and try new things and live new lives," Mannes said.

He thinks his generation's more positive attitude toward retirement might stem from the wealth with which so many baby boomers grew up. Many of them learned how to enjoy themselves and prioritize a work-life balance long ago, before retirement was really on their minds. Their parents, however, often "fiercely identified with their occupations," according to Mannes.

"I see a desire to find a balance between giving to the community and connecting with friends, but also just having the free time to goof off in the way that you want to goof off," Mannes said.

The art of letting go

Nancy Gottlieb, 73, retired from the world of banks and trading firms at 64 and successfully struck Mannes' balance. Leaving work hasn't been an issue for her.

"I think it's usually more of a problem for men than women," she said.

While Jon Gottlieb pores over statistics-based baseball simulations – alone – his wife goes out to eat. She plays cards or mahjong five times a week and regularly calls friends on the phone. Jon has friends, too, but his social calendar is not nearly as robust as his wife's.

Nancy Gottlieb thinks women are more likely to maintain friendships and ask each other out for lunch or coffee. Mannes hasn't seen many men of his age struggle with retirement, but Wolf agrees with Nancy. Social isolation is more common among men than women, he said, and men participate in activities less than women.

"The running joke has always been that women are gathering friends as they get older, while men are shedding them," Wolf said.

He explained that socialization is a "major" determinant of health. Members of older generations who tend to isolate, or are generally disconnected from society, are often at a greater risk of mortality. Boredom, too, has a serious effect on health.

But Tai Chin, 75, is wary of needing a goal to sustain him. He just moved into Gottlieb's building after 40 years in Arlington, Texas, so he could be closer to his sons and grandchildren. He's divorced and not interested in changing that.

"I'm alone, but I'm not lonely," he said.

Chin hasn't fully retired yet from his job helping people sign up for health care coverage; he doesn't see the point. He works on his own time, entirely remote. These days, he only does about five hours a week plus the time he has to spend renewing his license before September. The rest of the day is his, spent mostly on yoga, messing around on his computer, taking walks and reading.

Chin reads a lot of mystical literature. He's learning how to exist in the moment and accept the phase of life that he's in now, when his responsibilities are dwindling and he has, essentially, total freedom.

"My goal would be to not have any goals," he said.

Gottlieb ultimately wants the same thing, even if he won't take Chin's meditative approach. At this late stage in his life, he faces what, for him, might be akin to a Herculean task. His best friend, Bob Burger, isn't sure Gottlieb can really give up cycling. In his eyes, Gottlieb is unusually motivated, the type of man who needs something to reach for.

"Sometimes retirement creates a void for people," said Burger, 74, who lives in Wilmette.

For his part, Burger has had no trouble with retirement. He gave up a job he didn't enjoy very much when he was 49 and took to traveling the world with his wife. In September, he's leaving for Croatia, Ireland and the Alps.

"I'm much happier being a nobody without work," Burger said. He's not so sure, though, that Gottlieb – who not only never sits down but also rarely stops talking – can be a nobody.

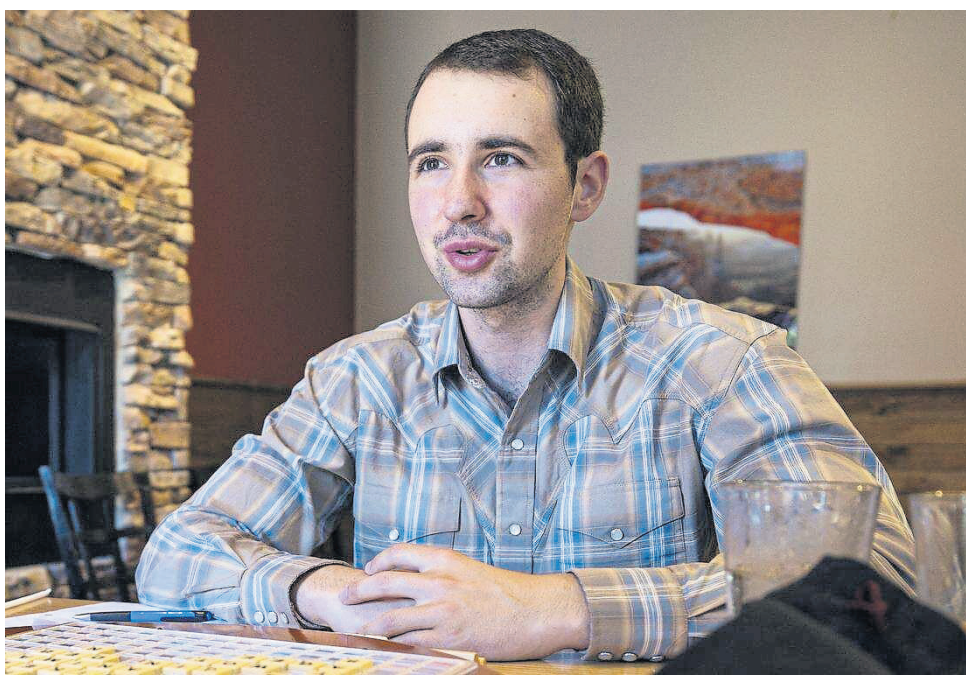
Gottlieb is an intense guy; he said so himself. He wakes up at 6 a.m. every day and wears some variation of the same shirt every time he rides his bike. The only time Gottlieb "goofs off" is during his daily gossip session with a group of old ladies. They float on pool noodles and discuss the geriatric drama of their high-rise.

Maybe fulfillment, for Gottlieb, will always be tied to bicycles. He has failed, so far, at cycling retirement: A week after he reached mile 115,000, he was still riding almost every morning. He's been trying to find an adult tricycle to ride, so that he can stay active in a safer manner, but it's not the kind of contraption widely available in Chicago. For now, Gottlieb is still a two-wheel guy. Who knows if he'll ever master the art of giving up.

Christian Kantosky / The Lexington Herald-Leader / TNS

Mack Meller plays Firemen during a Scrabble club meeting on July 27 at Sedona Taphouse in Lexington, Ky.

Mack Meller, left, the 2024 Scrabble national champion, and Jan Hatton, right, each play a 1v1 game during a Lexington Scrabble club meeting on July 27 at Sedona Taphouse in Lexington, Ky.



Mack Meller, plays game of Scrabble during a Scrabble club meeting on July 27 at Sedona Taphouse in Lexington, Ky.

He's played Scrabble since he was 5

He became a national champ

By JAKE MCMAHON
Lexington Herald-Leader (TNS)

Mack Meller plays Fred Morlen during a Scrabble club meeting on July 27 at Sedona Taphouse in Lexington, Ky.

LEXINGTON, Ky. – Mack Meller strolled into the Sedona Taphouse with a brown leather briefcase.

It had been a while since the 25-year-old joined the weekly gathering of the Lexington Scrabble club. Travel had taken up most of his time recently, but on a recent Sunday, Meller walked right into the restaurant, sat down, and began playing like he had never missed a meeting.

Others in attendance didn't forget him either.

"He's the national champion," people whispered at the other end of the table where Meller sat, alerting newcomers to the club that the nation's best Scrabble player was there.

Meller opened his briefcase and passed to the duo of players to his left an $80 Scrabble board, a timer and a bag printed with an American flag and full of professional-grade Scrabble tiles. Meller didn't need his own board, because a tournament-grade mahogany one was already waiting in front of him.

Across from it was Larry Branstetter, a 68-year-old who said he'd been playing Scrabble since he was a kid. But even his decades of experience couldn't save him.

Why 'it's horrible' playing Scrabble against Meller

Meller took the lead early. A hot start that included word plays of Jete (a French ballet term; 11 points), Agee (meaning to one's side; 8 points including a double letter score on the G and second E) and Haj (an Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca; 21 points with a triple word score on H).

After two bingos, plays that use all the letter tiles in the deck, of alienee (someone to whom the title of property is transferred; 7 points) and smooching (affectionate play; 17 points) by Meller, Branstetter found himself down 100 points. When asked if that lead was insurmountable, Branstetter said no.

Fellow Scrabble club member Jan Hatton disagreed.

"Against him (Meller), yes," Hatton said, without even looking away from her own board.

It became insurmountable after Meller place oology (the study of bird eggs; 10 points) and unais (the plural for unau, which is a two-toed sloth; 5 points). Meller beat Branstetter 471-274.

Sitting in front of a board full of words, Branstetter could only come up with two on what it's like to play Meller.

"It's horrible," Branstetter said.

A Scrabble Grandmaster at 17

Meller started playing Scrabble at around 5 years old with his dad. Out of anger at losing to his dad, he said he started taking the game seriously, reading a dictionary to increase his word arsenal.

Meller, who moved to Lexington to be more centralized three years ago, started playing in a Scrabble club in his hometown of Bedford, New York, and got his first Scrabble tournament experience at 10 years old.

From there, it was a fast rise to Scrabble stardom.

At age 11, Meller became the youngest Scrabble player to achieve a 1600 player rating, which is expert status. At 13, Meller's player rating eclipsed 2000, which he said made him one of the top players in the world.

To be considered a Scrabble Grandmaster, a player has to hold a top 1 percent ranking for five years in a row. Meller was a Grandmaster at 17.

He said some people were frustrated when they lost to a pre-teen Meller rising the ranks, but he said most in the Scrabble community were welcoming of Meller's success at such a young age.

"I was a pretty well-known entity within the community pretty quickly," Meller said. "Everyone was super welcoming and eager to see a new kid who was doing well."

Last year, Meller reached the top of the Scrabble ranks in the country, winning the Scrabble player's championship. He said the national championship is nice, helping his branding as a part-time Scrabble professional, but he said nothing else has really changed.

"I am not really a better player one day because I win this tournament than I was before, right?" Meller said. "In terms of who I am as a player, it doesn't actually change that much… with the title I'm just as driven to keep improving."

The key to success is memorization

Meller's journey to the top of the Scrabble world was fast, but he said it was a long process to get to his level. Meller said the key to his success is memorization.

Meller had to look up definitions for most of the unusual words he played in his games at the Scrabble club. He said you don't have to know what words mean, or how to say them, you just have to know that they're words.

Meller also said Scrabble isn't just words. It's understanding the board and calculating point values for different words in different spot or the odds that your opponent has a certain tile.

"It gets very complex from a strategical standpoint, which I think a lot of people don't realize," Meller said. "That's what I spend most of my time trying to work on as I try to stay in shape and keep improving."

Even as the returning champion, Meller said he won't be the favorite at this year's national championship. That honor, he said, goes to perhaps the greatest Scrabble player of all time, Nigel Richards.

The greatest Scrabble player of all time?

Richards, a native of New Zealand who lives in Malaysia, has won five National Scrabble Championships, winning four consecutively from 2010-2013 – but that's not what makes him special. He's also won French and Spanish Scrabble championships, Meller said, without speaking the languages.

"He basically just sits and memorizes all the words from different languages," Meller said. "He's believed to have a photographic memory… he has an uncanny ability to just look at the page and just ingrain it and know whether something is a word or not."

Meller acknowledged that Richards is a better player than he is, saying that in one game against Richards, he would have a 45 percent chance of winning. However, Meller has played Richards before.

In what Meller emphasized as a minuscule sample size in terms of Scrabble, he is 2-1 against Richards.

"That mean's nothing from a statiscal standpoint," a humble Meller said about his winning record against the greatest to ever touch the tiles. "I'm a strong enough player that if I can get a tiny bit of luck, or maybe he makes a rare mistake, that I can certainly beat him."

Aside from Richards, Meller said there are "10 or 20" people he thinks could dethrone him at this year's nationals. The Scrabble Players Championship will run Aug. 9-13 in Baltimore.

"It's going to come down to who can preform better over those five days," Meller said. "Maybe a little bit of luck, definitely a lot of skill."

FOCUS

Photos by Shafkat Anowar / The Dallas Morning News / TNS

Artwork by physicist and former UT Dallas professor Russell Stoneback is shown July 15 at his home in Plano. Stoneback turns complex space science into digital artworks, large-scale prints and even a patented musical instrument that plays music using electricity and light.

Science or *art*?

This physicist's work blurs the line

By MIRIAM FAUZIA
The Dallas Morning News (TNS)

DALLAS — The walls of Russell Stoneback's home office in Plano, Texas, are alive with color – canvases streaked with vivid yellows, neon purples and somber blues. Some of these artworks are crisscrossed with wavy lines; others bloom with floral-like patterns that feel part M.C. Escher, part Georgia O'Keeffe.

Though they look like paintings, Stoneback never lifted a brush. Each piece is a portrait of data: scientific measurements transformed by a computer into stunning visual art – a way, he says, of making the invisible visible, and turning science into something you can see, feel and maybe hang on your wall.

"People are disconnected from physics. It's all math, and it's challenging," said Stoneback, a physicist and former professor in the subject at the University of Texas at Dallas. "Usually with the presentation of it, you lose the wonder and the beauty, and all that's out there just becomes cold, hard math."

Originally from Austin, Stoneback, 45, has long been passionate about finding ways to represent science through art. That passion began to take shape while he was studying physics at the University of Texas at Austin. When he wasn't hitting the books or working construction to support himself financially, he played guitar in a band. During his senior year, he began building a guitar most musicians probably wouldn't recognize, what he later dubbed a "photonic" guitar.

Artwork by physicist and former UT Dallas professor Russell Stoneback on display at his home in Plano.

In an acoustic guitar, plucked strings vibrate through a hollow wooden body, amplifying the sound waves that travel through the air. Stoneback's photonic guitar – made entirely from metal – swapped out the vibrating strings and wooden body for something less conventional: electricity and light. An app that Stoneback created called Cosmic Guitar converts those light waves into sound.

"The thing that resonates here is electricity," Stoneback said. "So it's electricity at the same size as [it's] sound waves."

After undergrad, Stoneback earned his master's and Ph.D. in physics at the University of Texas at Dallas, finishing the latter in 2009. He stayed on there for 12 more years, designing scientific instruments – such as the nanosatellite CubeSat – that would fly aboard NASA spacecraft. In 2021, he left the university to start his own business, Cosmic Studio, which focuses on creating products that blend science and art.

The art came about in trying to solve a problem that has irked physicists and space scientists for quite some time: how to graph the twisty, tangled lines of magnetic fields, such as those found around Earth and in space, into clean geometric angles.

"Earth's magnetic field is just complicated, and it was just too complicated that [scientists] thought it was impossible to come up with a good solution," Stoneback said. "It's hard to describe to non-physicists, but the field that this covers is electromagnetism, and that's a linear field. Being a linear field implies you have to have these simpler solutions, even though people claim they weren't there. So I knew there had to be a solution, and then I was able to find it."

The solution came through a software tool Stoneback developed called OMMBV, short for Orthogonal Multipole Magnetic Basis Vectors. The program takes those curvy magnetic fields and reorients them linearly, making them much easier for scientists to map and understand how these invisible forces behave. OMMBV was used by NASA for its ICON mission, which studied the ionosphere, the outermost layer of Earth's atmosphere.

Stoneback said his software has also been used by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to study data from COSMIC-2 , a constellation of six microsatellites the agency launched in June 2019.

The striking colors and intricate patterns that OMMBV generates aren't designed for aesthetics – they began as diagnostic tools, internal checks meant to verify the software's accuracy. Each image captures real physical values, translated through color palettes carefully crafted to reflect even the smallest shifts in the data. These "perceptually uniform" color maps, Stoneback said, ensure that a subtle change in the data produces an equally noticeable shift in color or brightness, making images as precise as they are captivating.

One piece in his home office, for example, features glowing orange waves rippling across a variegated background fading from deep purple at the center to near-black at the edges. This image is based on data collected along Earth's magnetic equator, which isn't fixed like the geographic equator, but slowly changes with location and time.

So far, Stoneback has generated around 700 unique pieces of art using OMMBV, all drawn from data behind a recent study he coauthored. He said he hasn't altered or manipulated the images; they emerge directly from the data itself. Why they turn out the way they do is something of a mystery even to him.

"I don't have the words for how these images come out," he said. "It's almost shocking that it comes out right because it just doesn't look like something that would just happen."

Stoneback hopes his work reshapes how people see science, not just as numbers and equations, but as something visual, emotional, even beautiful. During a plenary talk at the 2022 CEDAR Workshop, a community-driven conference on the upper atmosphere, he noticed a woman in the front row visibly moved by the images he shared.

"Most people don't talk about this," he said. "Most of the time when you try to do science outreach, there's always a scientist out there who's like, 'No, that's not science, we shouldn't be talking to the public.' They kind of kill all these fun, outreach types of things."

"I'm still shocked by [the art], especially when I first saw it and the number of times I gasped when these images would pop up," he added. "I know it's science, but when I look at them, it doesn't look or feel like science. I'm hopeful I can get people to feel some form of connection to that."

HEALTH

Dubbed "Japanese walking," the latest viral fitness trend is all over TikTok and has people wondering whether this short-interval workout can improve health more efficiently than a traditional stroll.

Jim Cooke / Los Angeles Times / TNS

'Japanese walking'

promises big health gains in just 30 minutes

However, health experts are skeptical about its benefits

By ASPEN ANDERSON
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

It promises the benefits of a 10,000-step walk in just 30 minutes. No gym membership required. Just a pair of shoes and a willingness to alternate between brisk and slow-paced walking in three-minute bursts.

Dubbed "Japanese walking," the latest viral fitness trend is all over TikTok and has people wondering whether this short-interval workout can improve health more efficiently than a traditional stroll.

The trend has spread across social media and beyond, with bloggers, online articles and major media outlets all jumping in on the walking routine.

The protocol traces back to a 2007 Japanese study that tested the effects of high-intensity interval walking on middle-aged and older adults. But the recent buzz started with a punchy video from Australian content creator and fitness coach Eugene Teo that surpassed 10 million views on TikTok and 17 million views on YouTube. Known to his over 426,000 TikTok followers and 1.22 million YouTube followers as "Coach Eugene," Teo rebranded the science-backed routine into an accessible, algorithm-friendly idea: "Japanese walking."

"People don't like fitness jargon," Teo, 33, said in a recent interview with The Times. "They don't like scientific terms … and if I want to impact millions globally ... I like to make fitness advice and scientific jargon a lot more accessible."

In his video explainer, Teo describes the method: Walk fast for three minutes, slow down for three minutes and repeat the cycle five times.

According to the small study of 186 women and 60 men, participants who followed this routine four or more days a week saw greater improvements in blood pressure, leg strength and aerobic capacity than those in the moderate-intensity continuous walking group.

"It's that cardio work that a lot of people are missing," Teo said.

Teo, a longtime coach and nutritionist, didn't invent the protocol, but he did help it reach millions. He said his viral video resonated with people overwhelmed by the pressure to hit 10,000 steps a day – a goal Teo himself often finds out of reach.

He's been following this protocol on and off for years, ever since he came across the study. Usually, he does his walking on a treadmill.

"A lot of people have this all-or-nothing approach where they think, 'Oh, I can't hit 10,000 steps. I've failed,'" he said. "It's about just changing the stigma people have and that all-or-nothing mentality ... of what fitness should be about."

He emphasizes effort over perfection: Walk fast enough to get out of breath, but not so fast that you can't finish the three-minute interval. The recovery periods are as slow as needed to reset.

But is the science behind the trend as strong as the messaging?

Dr. Helga Van Herle, a cardiologist with Keck Medicine of USC, noted flaws in the original study's design – namely, that only the high-intensity walking group was monitored with accelerometers, not the moderate intensity group, a bias that could have skewed results.

"This creates a major bias in the monitoring and compliance and could potentially skew the results in favor of the high-intensity training group," she said in an email, pointing to the Hawthorne effect, a phenomenon in which people alter their behavior because they know they're being watched.

Dr. Parveen Garg, also with Keck Medicine of USC, said he doesn't see intense interval walking as a standout recommendation among physicians. The study, he said, was small and meant to be thought-provoking and encourage further research, not to support sweeping conclusions.

He supports any activity that gets people moving but cautions against over-hyping Japanese walking benefits or ease.

"It's kind of onerous," he said, explaining that remembering to switch gears every three minutes, walking fast and slow and navigating technology isn't easy for everyone.

He said it's possible to get similar benefits by walking continuously at a vigorous pace for a shorter time. But there isn't enough evidence to confirm that.

Experts agree that vigorous activity, even in short spurts, is beneficial. David Raichlen, professor of biological sciences and anthropology at USC, said short intervals of increased effort – even just walking briskly for a few minutes – can yield meaningful health effects.

"There's something to the idea that small amounts of vigorous activity are really beneficial," Raichlen said.

Raichlen also noted that calling high-intensity interval walking "Japanese walking" simply because of the study's origin is problematic.

Yasuyuki Suzuki, a cardiac imaging specialist from Tokyo, is aware of the trend and the associated study. He said that while there is some new interest in the topic, it is not trending in Japan the way it appears to be in other parts of the world. He also said he does not feel any discomfort or concern about it being referred to as "Japanese walking."

As for whether this method is better than 10,000 steps or continuous walking, Raichlen is hesitant to say – the research just isn't there yet.

Higher walking cadence has been linked to lower dementia risk, Raichlen said. Also, walking in general has been tied to lower mortality, reduced cancer risk and improved cardiovascular health.

"I do think there's a lot of good from encouraging people to think about walking as exercise," Raichlen said. "Finding ways to sort of make walking work better for you is, you know, not a bad thing."

Still, the simplicity and catchy name may be why it took off.

"Pretty much anybody in Los Angeles can go outside and walk around," said Sarah T. Roberts, a UCLA associate professor and internet culture expert.

Roberts sees the trend as a reflection of broader social forces, including medical mistrust and the rising cost of health care and fitness. "We're in a moment of economic uncertainty," she said. "For most people, a $300-a-month membership at Equinox is not a reality."

That, she said, makes low-barrier trends like "Japanese walking" especially appealing. But Roberts cautioned against the risks of turning to TikTok and other social media platforms for medical advice.

"Stuff doesn't happen in a vacuum," she said. "There's a bigger social and political context to all of these things, and the backdrop to these kinds of trends is not great."

Roberts encourages viewers to critically evaluate where their health advice comes from and who profits from it. "People with big followings often have something to sell," she said. "They're not really acting in the public interest."

Still, Roberts said, with every health trend, social media companies are profiting. Although some platforms have tried to crack down on medical misinformation, Roberts said such content moderation has fallen out of favor because it affects revenue.

"Devaluing expertise means devaluing the collective knowledge that people have in certain domains," Roberts said. "If I try to fix my own car, my car is probably not going to run very well. Now apply that to my body."

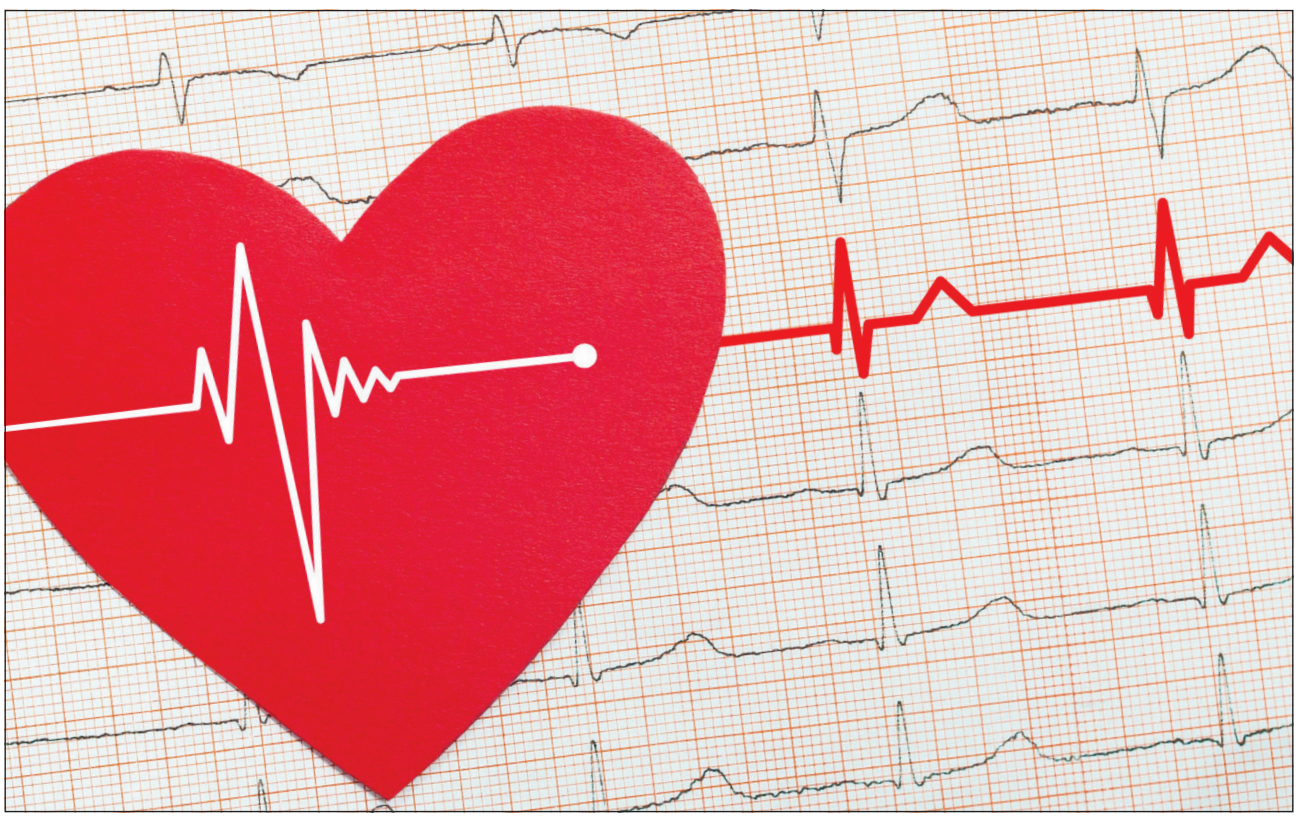
Teo said fitness trends should be approached with discernment. He's not claiming to replace traditional walking – just to offer a stepping stone for cardio.

And if a viral name is what it takes to get people walking, he's OK with that. "As long as you're not misleading people," he said, "and there's legitimate substance behind it, it's a great way to spin things."

Teo, Raichlen, Garg and Roberts all agree on one thing: Talk to your doctor before starting any new exercise routine, especially one that reaches vigorous intensity.

This test can see a heart attack in your future

By PAULA SPAN
KFF Health News (TNS)



Vienybe / Dreamstime / TNS

A cardiac stress test shows how your heart works during physical activity.

A long list of Lynda Hollander's paternal relatives had heart disease, and several had undergone major surgeries. So when she hit her mid-50s and saw her cholesterol levels creeping up after menopause, she said, "I didn't want to take a chance."

A cardiologist told Hollander that based on factors like age, sex, cholesterol, and blood pressure, she faced a moderate risk of a major cardiac event, like a heart attack, within the next 10 years.

Doctors typically counsel such patients about the importance of diet and exercise, but Hollander, now 64, a social worker in West Orange, New Jersey, didn't have much room for improvement. She was already a serious runner, and although "I fall off the wagon once in a while," her diet was basically healthy. Attempts to lose weight didn't lower her cholesterol.

Her doctor explained that a coronary artery calcium test, something Hollander had never heard of, could provide a more precise estimate of her risk of atherosclerotic heart disease. Her doctor explained that a coronary artery calcium test, something Ms. Hollander had never heard of, could provide a more precise estimate of her risk of atherosclerotic heart disease. A brief and painless CT scan, it would indicate whether the fatty deposits called plaque were developing in the arteries leading to her heart.

When plaque ruptures, it can cause clots that block blood flow and trigger heart attacks. The scan would help determine whether Hollander would benefit from taking a statin, which could reduce plaque and prevent more from forming.

"The test is used by more people every year," said Michael Blaha, co-director of the preventive cardiology program at Johns Hopkins University. Calcium scans quadrupled from 2006 to 2017, his research team reported, and Google searches for related terms have risen even more sharply.

Yet "it's still being underused compared to its value," he said.

One reason is that although the test is comparatively inexpensive – sometimes up to $300, but often $100 or less – patients usually must pay for it out-of-pocket. Medicare rarely covers it, though some doctors argue that it should.

Patients with a CAC score of zero – no calcification – have lower risk than their initial assessments indicate and aren't candidates for cholesterol-lowering drugs. But Hollander's score was in the 50s – not high but not negligible.

"It was the first indication of what was going on inside my arteries," she said.

Though guidelines vary, cardiologists generally offer statins to patients with calcium scores over zero, and suggest higher intensity statins when scores exceed 100. At over 300, patients' risks approach those of people who've already had heart attacks; they may need still more aggressive treatment.

Hollander has taken a low dose of rosuvastatin (brand name: Crestor) ever since, supplemented by a non-statin drug, a shot called evolocumab (Repatha).

This is the way calcium testing is supposed to work. It's not a screening test for everyone. It's intended only for selected asymptomatic patients, ages 40 to 75, who have never had a heart attack or a stroke and are not already on cholesterol drugs.

The test helps answer a pointed question: to statin, or not to statin.

If a doctor calculates the 10-year risk of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease at 5 percent or lower, drugs are unnecessary for now. Over 20 percent, "there's no doubt the risk is sufficiently high to justify medication," said Philip Greenland, a preventive cardiologist at Northwestern University and co-author of a recent review in JAMA.

"It's the in-between range where it's more uncertain," he said, including "borderline" risk of 5 percent to 7.5 percent and "intermediate" risk of 7.5 percent to 20 percent.

Why add another measurement to these assessments, which already incorporate risk factors like smoking and diabetes?

"A risk score is derived from a large population, with mathematical modeling," Blaha explained. "We can say that this score describes the risk of heart disease among thousands of people. But there are lots of limitations in applying them to one individual."

A calcium scan, however, produces an image of one individual's arteries. Alexander Zheutlin, a cardiology fellow and researcher at Northwestern University, shows patients their images, so that they can see the lighter-colored calcifications.

Cardiologists tend to be fans of calcium testing, because they so regularly encounter patients who are reluctant to take statins. People who feel fine may hesitate to start drugs they'll take for the rest of their lives, despite statins' proven history of reducing heart attacks, strokes and cardiac deaths.

In 2019, a survey of almost 5,700 adults for whom statin therapy was recommended found that a quarter were not in treatment. Of those, 10 percent had declined a statin and 30 percent had started and then discontinued, primarily citing fear of side effects.

An American College of Cardiology expert consensus report recently put the rate of muscle pain, statin users' most common complaint, at 5 percent to 20 percent. Researchers consider the fear of side effects overblown, citing studies showing that reports of muscle pain were comparable whether patients took statins or placebos.

"The actual risk is much, much lower than the perceived risk," Zheutlin said.

That may be little comfort to people who are in pain, but cardiologists argue that reducing doses or switching to different statins usually solves the problem. Some patients will do better on a non-statin cholesterol drug.

Hollander, for example, suffered "muscle cramps that would wake me up at night." Her doctor advised fewer doses, so Hollander now takes Crestor three days a week and self-injects Repatha twice monthly.

(Statins also carry a very low risk of a dangerous condition, rhabdomyolysis, that causes muscle breakdown, and they slightly increase the chance of diabetes.)

Some caveats: No one has undertaken a randomized clinical trial to show whether calcium testing eventually reduces heart attacks and cardiac deaths. That's why, although several professional associations endorse calcium scans to help determine treatment, the independent U.S. Preventive Services Task Force has called the current evidence "insufficient" to recommend widespread use.

Such a trial would be expensive and difficult to mount, with many confounding variables. And pharmaceutical companies aren't eager to underwrite one, since a successful result could mean that patients with zero scores avoid cholesterol drugs altogether.

But a recent Australian study of asymptomatic patients with family histories of coronary artery disease found that, after three years, those who had undergone calcium scans had sustained a reduction in cholesterol and a significantly lower risk of heart disease than those who had not been tested.

The test "leads to more statin prescriptions, better adherence to statins, less progression of atherosclerosis, and less plaque growth," Greenland said of the study, in which he was not involved. "It tips the scale."

Another concern: people age 75 and older. Most will have arterial plaque, making a scan's benefit "less clear-cut," said Zheutlin, lead author of a recent JAMA Cardiology article pointing out that CAC testing can be both overused and underused.

Because older adults face more chronic diseases and medical issues, cholesterol-lowering may become a lower priority. A study now enrolling participants over 75 should answer some questions about statins, calcium scans, and dementia in a few years.

Meanwhile, cardiologists see calcium scans as a persuasive tool.

"It's incredibly frustrating," Zheutlin said. With statins, "we have cheap, safe, effective drugs available at any pharmacy" that help prevent heart attacks. If CAC test results prove more influential than traditional risk assessments alone, he said, more patients might agree to take them.

A calcium scan helped Stephen Patrick, 70, a retired tech executive in San Francisco, reach that point. "For years, I was borderline on cholesterol, and I managed to beat it back with less cheese toast" and lots of exercise, he said. "I was on no meds, and I took pride in that."

Last fall, with both his total and his LDL cholesterol higher than recommended, his doctor suggested a calcium scan. His score: 176.

He's taking atorvastatin (Lipitor) daily, and his cholesterol levels have dropped dramatically. "I might have tried it anyway," he said. "But the calcium score meant I had to pay more attention."

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ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

What families should know about diseases spread by mosquitoes and ticks

By ANDREW BERNSTEIN, MD, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

Infectious diseases spread by insects are a major cause of illnesses to children and adults worldwide. As you spend time with family outdoors, keep everyone safe with knowledge of the diseases spread by mosquitoes and ticks.

Besides being itchy annoyances, mosquito bites can transmit a number of diseases such as West Nile virus and La Crosse virus, both of which get plenty of media coverage during the summer months in the U.S. due to the potential encephalitis (brain swelling) they can cause.

West Nile virus is the leading cause of mosquito-borne illness disease in the United States. Fortunately, most cases of West Nile virus infection are mild or without symptoms. People may have symptoms such as fever, headache and body aches. Less common symptoms, which occur mostly in older adults, may include severe headache, high fever, stiff neck, confusion, seizures, sensitivity to light, muscle weakness and loss of consciousness.

La Crosse virus has become the second most common disease transmitted by mosquito bites in children. Severe disease after being infected by the virus happens most often in children under 16 years old. The majority of infected children have symptoms due to brain swelling such as fever, stiff neck, confusion and seizures. Fortunately, despite these serious symptoms, few have died from La Crosse virus infection.

Zika virus is another illness primarily spread by mosquitoes with infection during pregnancy potentially causing fetuses to develop a birth defect called microcephaly. Outbreaks are currently happening in many countries and territories. Many people who get infected with Zika virus either won't have symptoms or they will be very mild. Symptoms include fever, headaches, swollen limbs, itchy rash, joint pain or red eyes.

Tick bites are also a source of potential infections. Lyme disease is spread by deer ticks – tiny, black-brown arachnids about the size of a sesame seed. Ticks, which have 8 legs and a tiny pincer mouth, need to be attached for at least 36 hours and be swollen from their so called "blood meal" to transmit Lyme disease to a person.

Lyme disease is an important health concern in certain regions of the country: Northeast, from Virginia to Maine; north-central states, mostly Wisconsin and Minnesota; and the West Coast, particularly northern California.

Often the first and most obvious symptom of Lyme disease is a localized rash. The Lyme disease rash begins as a pink or red circle at the site of tick attachment. This circle expands over time and may become several inches or larger. A classic bulls-eye appearance, with concentric rings, appears in some people.

The Lyme disease rash generally occurs 1 to 2 weeks after the tick bite, but ranges from 3 days to 30 days. The rash may develop without any other symptoms, or it may be associated with headache, chills, fever, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, and swollen glands, especially those in the neck or groin.

Rocky Mountain spotted fever is another disease spread by ticks that children are especially vulnerable to. The disease is particularly deadly, becoming fatal after the first 5 days if antibiotics aren't administered.

Despite the name, Rocky Mountain spotted fever currently occurs mostly in other regions of the United States, including North and South Carolina, Oklahoma and Tennessee.

Most people develop a red, dot-like rash that begins on the wrists and ankles and spreads toward the center of the body. Symptoms may present with faint rashes also in palms and soles or no rash at all. In addition to a rash, other symptoms of Rocky Mountain spotted fever may include severe headache, fever, muscle aches, abdominal pain, nausea and diarrhea or vomiting.

PREVENT LYME DISEASE!
• WEAR REPELLENT
• CHECK FOR TICKS DAILY
• SHOWER SOON AFTER BEING OUTDOORS
• CALL YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU GET A FEVER OR RASH
For more information: www.cdc.gov/Lyme
CDC

Steve Callahan / Dreamstime / TNS

Tick bites are also a source of potential infections. Lyme disease is spread by deer ticks – tiny, black-brown arachnids about the size of a sesame seed.

Since 2004, when Powassan virus infection began to be tracked, many cases have been reported from April to December. This disease is transmitted mainly by deer ticks. The transmission can occur as quickly as 15 minutes after the tick is attached.

Although the majority of people who get sick with Powassan virus infection are older adults, an infant was reported as infected in 2016. This child began having fever and vomiting followed by seizures.

With some of these diseases being transmitted by ticks, it is crucial to limit the risk of being bitten. Children need and love to be outdoors. The chance of your children becoming infected by insects and ticks is quite low, especially when you take steps to reduce the risk of bites.

To prevent mosquito and tick bites, it is safe to use repellents or wear permethrin-treated clothing. For younger children, repellents should not be applied to the hands or face and should be used as few times during the day as possible. Repellents should not be used on infants under 6 months of age.

If your child plays outside in an area where ticks live, it is very important to check for ticks on their skin daily. Removing clothing and showering promptly after being outside can help remove unattached ticks.

If your child has a bug bite and shows symptoms of West Nile, La Crosse, Zika, Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Powassan virus infection or other illnesses spread by mosquitoes or ticks, talk with your pediatrician.

Andrew Bernstein, MD, FAAP is a general pediatrician in the Chicago area.

She had an uncomplicated birth at an Idaho hospital – this is what it cost her

Sarah A. Miller / The Idaho Statesman / TNS

Boise resident Josie Last was surprised at the cost of her bill after giving birth to her son Luca.

By ANGELA PALERMO
Idaho Statesman (TNS)

BOISE, Idaho — Josie Last arrived at the hospital at 7 a.m. nearly 41 weeks pregnant and scheduled for an induced labor. That evening, at about 11:30 p.m. on March 26, she gave birth to her first baby, a boy named Luca, at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in West Boise.

Everything went smoothly, she said. Last delivered him without any complications, and afterward the infant underwent some routine screenings. Two days later, they were discharged.

"Obviously, I received amazing care," the 35-year-old said. "The doctors, the nurses, everyone there was incredible. I was treated with so much respect. I would deliver a baby there again in a heartbeat. It was an awesome experience."

"I just couldn't believe the billing."

Despite careful planning, she and her husband were stunned by the cost: $6,000 out of pocket. It was double what their insurer had estimated and included two separate room and board charges, even though she and her newborn shared the same room. When she questioned the duplicate fees, the hospital's billing department assured her it was correct.

Their experience is hardly unique – about one in five new parents in America receive a "surprise bill" after childbirth. But it raises questions about hospital billing practices, transparency from health insurers and the sheer cost of a routine delivery.

Couple saves up for childbirth

When Last became pregnant last year, the couple did everything they could to determine how much the delivery would cost.

She planned to give birth at Saint Alphonsus because it was in-network with their insurance provider, Select Health, the insurance arm of Intermountain Health, a nonprofit hospital-and-clinic system based in Salt lake City.

"I've always known that giving birth was going to be expensive, and that's why we tried to do our best with calling the insurance company and finding out how much we would owe so we could prepare for it," Last told the Idaho Statesman in an interview. (Last is her maiden name. For privacy, she asked to be identified by that instead of her married surname.)

She said Select Health told her by phone that she would likely owe $3,000, her out-of-pocket maximum, according to insurance documents she shared with the Statesman.

Plus, according to an example scenario on a summary of benefits and coverage sheet for her health plan, the Select Health SAHA Silver Copay Plan (SAHA stands for Saint Alphonsus Health Alliance), having a baby, including nine months of in-network prenatal care and a hospital delivery, would cost $3,560.

So she budgeted for that amount in her health savings account, or HSA, where money withdrawn for medical expenses is not taxed.

First bill arrives, then another

In April, a couple of weeks after giving birth, she got a bill. It had her son's name on it.

"TOTAL MEMBER RESPONSIBILITY: $3,000," it said.

The hospital had charged her insurer $5,844.95, including $4,910 for room and board for two nights ($2,455 per night), $323 for a vaginal delivery, $481 for lab tests, $42.95 for medications and $88 for one vaccine, according to an explanation of benefits. Select Health covered $2,844.95, leaving her outstanding balance at $3,000.

"We were all ready to receive that bill," Last said. "That's the bill we had budgeted for. That's what I assumed we were paying."

Then, about four weeks later, they got another bill. This one had her name on it.

"TOTAL MEMBER RESPONSIBILITY: $3,000," it said.

The second bill showed an additional spate of charges. Saint Alphonsus had charged her insurer $11,516.70, including $6,852 for room and board for two nights ($3,426 per night), $145 for less than two hours of lactation assistance, $571.70 for medications, $516 for lab tests and $3,432 for the delivery. Select Health paid $9,027.65, leaving the amount she owed at $3,000.

'Charged twice' for the same room

Last said they were blindsided by the two bills. Even more perplexing were the duplicate room and board charges. She went through the documents line by line to try to make sense of it.

"I assumed that my baby and I would be one bill, because I was going in to give birth to the baby," she said. "It was never mentioned to me that both of us would be treated and billed separately for being in the same room. That just seems crazy."

She called the hospital's billing department to see if there might have been an error.

"The woman I spoke to was lovely," Last said. "She was like, 'Oh, that sounds weird. I'll submit a claim to the revenue integrity board and they'll review it.'"

A few weeks later the hospital called her back. The board determined the room charges were billed correctly. An employee explained that, once the infant was placed in the plastic bassinet by her hospital bed, that triggered the start of his own room and board charges, since her son was considered another patient.

Last said the only time her baby wasn't with her was when he was taken for screenings, circumcision and an immunization.

"I was told that even though they're in the same room with you, you still get charged twice for the room fees," she said. "I would understand if they took the baby to a nursery, and they were taking care of the baby for me in there, but the baby was with me. Everything was very easy, very normal."

She and her husband dipped into their savings to pay the unexpected bill.

Saint Alphonsus Health System told the Statesman in a statement that it follows standard hospital billing practices and "like other hospitals nationally and locally, includes a nursery charge for the care it provides to the newborn patient."

Dr. David Pate, a retired physician and the former CEO of St. Luke's Health System, the largest health system in Idaho, told the Statesman by phone that nursery charges can cover the overall care and resources dedicated to a newborn, not just the physical occupancy of a specific room.

"Even if the baby is in the same room, the nursery nurses still have to do regular assessments and all that," Pate said. "That's my guess as to the explanation."

Doctor's recommendation at odds with cost

Last said that if she had known how much the hospital was going to charge for the room, she would have asked to be discharged sooner, even if that meant going against the recommendation of her doctor, who advised she stay two nights so she and her baby could rest and be monitored.

Most women in the U.S. stay an average of 48 hours for a vaginal birth, according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information. That allows hospital staff to watch for potential issues like excessive bleeding, infection or postpartum preeclampsia, a life-threatening condition that can develop soon after birth. Federal law requires that most insurance companies cover a postdelivery hospital stay of 48 hours for vaginal birth and 96 hours for cesarean section.

Last said the sheer cost of her uncomplicated delivery made her question whether she would have another child, and if she did, whether she would ask to be discharged from the hospital immediately after giving birth.

"I'm happy to pay the doctor's fee, I'm happy to pay for any screenings, medications, the care that we received there, absolutely, because the people working there were excellent," Last said. "But I'm not happy to pay an exorbitant out-of-pocket fee for us to stay in the hospital."

She said that, in a country with declining birth rates, where families are told they need to have more children, women shouldn't have to decide whether or not they can afford it.

The second most common contributing factor to maternal deaths in Idaho is "lack of access/financial resources," according to the latest available data reported by the state's Maternal Mortality Review Committee in 2021. That is the last year the committee published an annual report on maternal deaths. It does not include a breakdown by birth setting (hospital versus home).

"There's no way I would not want to give birth in a hospital with doctors who know what they're doing, because there's so many things that can go wrong, but it really discourages a lot of people from doing that," Last said. "I don't know if I'll do it again, and that's sad because I would love to have another baby. I just don't think it should cost thousands and thousands of dollars to do so."

Expert calls benefits explanation 'very misleading'

On the summary of benefits and coverage document for her health plan, where Select Health outlines in a chart what patients will pay for common medical events, like giving birth, the co-pay is listed as a flat $1,500 a day for "childbirth/delivery facility services."

Or in her case, $3,000 for two nights. That's what an insurance representative had told Last she would owe.

But what Select Health didn't say, or otherwise make clear, is that the $1,500 a day would just be for her, and that her infant would be subject to the same copay in addition.

"While the Select Health document seems clear and is not technically incorrect in how they handled the benefits, and I can tell this as someone knowledgeable about hospitals, I think it is very misleading and would give the average person the same impression as (Last)," Pate said after reviewing redacted copies of her records and health plan details.

Since the hospital considered Last and her baby two separate patients, and billed them both accordingly, her insurance provider did so too. But nothing in her coverage document implies as much. It says "if you are pregnant" ... "you will pay" $1,500 a day to give birth at an in-network facility. That amount is represented as the total cost.

Select Health did not respond to detailed questions or a request for comment for this story, citing federal privacy regulations.

The insurance provider said in a statement sent by email that it's committed to helping its members understand their benefits and coverage.

"Health insurance benefits are outlined in standard documents that provide detailed explanations of coverage for each member covered by the plan," Select Health said. "We encourage individuals to work with a licensed insurance agent when selecting a plan, as agents can help ensure the coverage aligns with their needs and provide guidance on how benefits are applied."

Pate said that if an insurance agent told Last it would be $3,000 and it turned out to be $6,000, they should work with her in some manner for service recovery.

"That's not how you treat clients," he said. "I bet no woman has ever asked that question: What it would cost for only her and not the baby. It's such a common practice that everybody needs to be transparent – hospitals, insurance companies, everybody."

It's unclear whether the charges violate the federal No Surprises Act that took effect in 2022 or the state's Idaho Patient Act, which took effect in 2020 and prohibits unfair debt-collection practices and excessive attorneys' fees in hospital-bill collection lawsuits.

The No Surprises Act protects patients from unexpected bills by out-of-network providers, but it doesn't regulate what in-network hospitals can charge or how they bill for services.

What if you've been overbilled?

If you think you've been overcharged, ask the hospital for an itemized bill with each billing code listed.

As Last did, check for duplicate charges, services you didn't receive or unclear fees. About 80 percent of medical bills contain an error, according to Patient Rights Advocate.

Then, call the hospital's billing office to ask for explanations about any confusing or questionable charges, as Last did. Sometimes errors can be corrected just by calling or by requesting an internal review from the hospital. If you still believe you've been overcharged, you can file a formal dispute with the hospital, your insurance company or both. Keep detailed records of every communication.

Other options, which Last has not yet taken but has not ruled out: Consider filing a consumer complaint with the Idaho Department of Insurance or contacting the Idaho Attorney General's consumer protection division, which enforces various laws intended to protect consumers from unfair practices. You can also consult a lawyer about suing.

Last said she and her husband have already paid the bills, and aren't convinced the cost of pursing legal action would be worth it.

"Next time, I think I'll be a lot smarter with the billing or at least ask the right questions up front, and I probably will leave the hospital sooner," she said. "But it's totally out of my financial control now."

Inflation stayed steady last month as Trump's tariffs hit some prices – here's what might feel most expensive

By SARAH FOSTER
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Dreamstime / TNS

Shelter costs have accounted for roughly half of the increase in inflation in the past year.

Inflation didn't improve last month, suggesting that businesses may be starting to pass along higher costs from tariffs onto the prices that you see on store shelves.

Consumer prices rose 0.2 percent between June and July, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)' latest monthly consumer price index (CPI) report. Excluding food and energy, a measure of "core" or "underlying" inflation rose 0.3 percent, the most since January. Many items currently exposed to tariffs – from coffee and tomatoes to toys, sporting equipment, household furnishings and apparel – continued to climb. Used cars and trucks rose the most since September 2022.

More price hikes could also still be coming down the pipeline, after higher tariff rates from key U.S. trading partners took effect earlier this month.

The majority of economists (41 percent) expect inflation to stay elevated through 2027, primarily driven by higher import taxes, according to Bankrate's latest Economic Indicator Survey. Meanwhile, Fed officials have said that uncertainty over how tariffs could impact inflation is the main reason rate cuts are on hold.

A little bit of inflation is good for consumers. The economy keeps growing and businesses continue expanding, hiring workers and bumping up their pay along the way. Too much inflation, however, feels akin to taking a pay cut. High inflation has consequences beyond just affordability, complicating saving for emergencies or investing for retirement.

Since the pandemic, consumer prices are 24.3 percent more expensive, a Bankrate analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows. That price burst means Americans need about $1,243 to buy the same goods and services that cost $1,000 when the coronavirus-induced recession occurred.

Looking for the latest information on consumer prices? Here's a round-up of where inflation is improving – and where it's still remaining stubborn.

Highlights of the latest statistics on inflation

■ Prices in July rose 2.7 percent from a year ago, matching last month's 2.7 percent annual rate, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics consumer price index (CPI).

■ Prices excluding food and energy (core inflation) edged up to 3.1 percent last month, the highest since February, according to the BLS.

■ Shelter costs were the primary driver of inflation in May, the BLS said. Medical care, airline fares, recreation, household furnishings and operations, as well as used vehicles also increased last month. Lodging, energy and grocery prices fell.

What is the current inflation rate?

Over the past 12 months, prices have risen 2.7 percent from a year ago, the BLS' CPI report showed. Excluding food and energy, "core" prices rose 3.1 percent annually.

Inflation is well below where it peaked in the summer of 2022. Yet the figures reflect bumpier progress on inflation's path back to the Fed's 2 percent target. Inflation was staying stubbornly above the Fed's goal even before President Donald Trump lifted tariffs to the highest since the Great Depression.

Prices that are rising the most

Of the nearly 400 items that BLS tracks, roughly 3 out of every 4 items (or 76 percent) increased in price between July 2024 and July 2025. One in 4 (or 25 percent) were cheaper in July than they were a year ago.

According to BLS, these are the prices that increased most over the past year (July 2024-July 2025 increase):

Eggs: 16.4 percent

Roasted coffee: 14.8 percent

■ Instant coffee: 14.3 percent

Utility (piped) gas service: 13.8 percent

■ College textbooks: 12.9 percent

Uncooked beef steaks: 12.4 percent

Audio equipment: 12.4 percent

Other condiments: 12.1 percent

Uncooked ground beef: 11.5 percent

Beef and veal: 11.3 percent

■ (Denotes an item that isn't seasonally adjusted.)

Month-over-month price changes, however, can give consumers a more real-time look at the prices that have recently been popping. Lower prices in the same year-ago period, for example, can cause an item to look like it's gaining speed, when it's slowing in reality.

Case in point: Utility piped gas services prices were cheaper in July than they were in June, even though they're still up 13.8 percent from a year ago.

Consumers, however, should take seasonal variations into account. Back-to-school or tax season, for instance, can often contribute to higher prices on items like tax return preparation services or college textbooks. BLS doesn't seasonally adjust all of its items, and year-over-year inflation rates can better smooth out those variations.

According to BLS, these are the prices that increased most over the past month (June 2025-July 2025 increase):

■ Frozen noncarbonated juices and drinks: 5.3 percent

Other motor fuels: 4.5 percent

Cookies: 4.2 percent

Airline fares: 4 percent

Lettuce: 4 percent

Ham, excluding canned: 3.9 percent

Tax return preparation and other accounting fees: 3.5 percent

Infants' and toddler's apparel: 3.3 percent

Tomatoes: 3.3 percent

Public transportation: 3 percent

■ (Denotes an item that isn't seasonally adjusted.)

Why is inflation still hot right now?

Consumers might notice just how much more expensive egg prices are from a year ago and wonder why the overall inflation rate is just 2.7 percent. To put it simply, the Bureau of Labor Statistics assigns weights to each individual good or service it tracks, based on how prevalent it's considered to be in a consumer's monthly budget.

Over the past year:

■ Shelter has accounted for roughly half (or 48 percent) of the increase in inflation;

■ Food has accounted for 14 percent of inflation; and

■ Car insurance has accounted for 6 percent of inflation.

Yet, in a sign that tariffs are contributing to the recent increase in inflation, core goods prices (excluding food and energy) accounted for one-fifth (or 20 percent) of overall inflation between June and July.

The drivers of inflation have changed dramatically since the initial post-pandemic price burst. When price pressures peaked in June 2022, shelter contributed just 20 percent of the annual increase in prices. But as consumers emerged from lockdowns with massive pent-up demand at the same time as global supply shortages, goods prices were driving the majority of price pressures, accounting for more than half (58 percent) of inflation between June 2021 and 2022. Energy was also responsible for about a third (32 percent) of inflation.

To combat inflation, officials on the Federal Reserve lifted borrowing costs from a rock-bottom level of near-zero percent to a 23-year high of 5.25 percent-5.5 percent. Now, borrowing costs are in a target range of 4.25 percent-4.5 percent.

Post-pandemic inflation: What's risen the most and what's gotten cheaper

Of the nearly 400 items BLS tracks, just 28 (or roughly 7 percent) are cheaper today than they were pre-pandemic.

To be sure, prices are expected to rise in the healthiest of economies – though only gradually, at a goal of around 2 percent a year.

According to BLS, these are the top 10 items that have jumped the most in price since the pandemic (February 2020-July 2025 increase):

Eggs: 86.5 percent

■ Frozen noncarbonated juices and drinks: 62.7 percent

Motor vehicle repair: 58.4 percent

Motor vehicle insurance: 56.6 percent

Margarine: 56.6 percent

Utility (piped) gas service: 54 percent

Uncooked beef roasts: 53.2 percent

■ Uncooked other beef and veal: 52 percent

Uncooked beef steaks: 48 percent

Beef and veal: 47.8 percent

■ (Denotes an item that isn't seasonally adjusted.)

Meanwhile, the items that have dropped in price the most since the pandemic are primarily goods and electronics – largely thanks to improving supply chains (February 2020-July 2025 decrease):

■ Smartphones: -60 percent

Telephone hardware, calculators, and other consumer information items: -50.4 percent

Televisions: -30.1 percent

Information technology commodities: -27.5 percent

Education and communication commodities: -23.6 percent

■ Computer software and accessories: -14.7 percent

■ Health insurance: -14.6 percent

Video and audio products: -11.9 percent

Other video equipment: -11.2 percent

Dishes and flatware: -11.1 percent

■ (Denotes an item that isn't seasonally adjusted.)

Inflation breakdown by product category

Looking for an easy analysis of how inflation is impacting the key items in your budget? Here's what Bankrate found.

■ Gas

Gasoline prices aren't rising as rapidly as they once were. Technically, prices are 9.5 percent cheaper than they were a year ago – after soaring as high as 59.8 percent in June 2022. Even so, prices at the pump cost about 15.3 percent more than before the pandemic.

Energy prices, however, tend to be volatile. For instance, gas prices declined 2.2 percent in July after a 1 percent increase in June.

■ Food

Grocery prices (formally known as food at home) rose 2.2 percent from a year ago and are about 28 percent more expensive than they were before the pandemic, BLS data indicates. At their peak, grocery prices soared 13.6 percent in August 2022 from a year ago.

Of the major shopping categories:

Meats: up 5.7 percent over the past year and 34.6 percent since February 2020

Fish and seafood: up 1.7 percent from a year ago and 17.9 percent since the start of the pandemic-induced recession

Dairy: up 1.5 percent over the past year and 21.4 percent more expensive since the pandemic

Fruits and vegetables: up 0.3 percent over the past year but 18.1 percent more expensive than before the pandemic

Sugar and sweets: up 5.1 percent from a year ago and 35.6 percent since the pandemic

Meanwhile, the price of dining out at a restaurant (formally known as full service meals and snacks) increased 4.4 percent from a year ago, capping off a 31.7 percent increase since the pandemic.

■ Rent

Rent has become a key corner of inflation – and one of the costliest categories of a consumer's budget. Prices, however, may finally be slowing, at least gradually.

Rent of primary residence rose 0.3 percent between June and July 2025, a clear cooldown from the post-pandemic peak of 0.8 percent. Over the past year, rents have risen 3.5 percent, now the lowest since the end of 2021.

Even so, Americans who've had to sign new leases since the outbreak are feeling the pinch: Rent is up 28.9 percent since the pandemic.

Rent prices have remained hotter than most economists and Fed officials originally expected. Lags could be one reason, as leases and housing agreements take longer to roll over from the previous year. Another could simply be because homes and mortgage rates have stayed pricey, keeping more renters on the sidelines than usual.

■ Vacations

Inflation hasn't just made the prices of key household essentials more expensive but the costs of vacations and travel, too. Airline ticket prices, for example, once soared as much as 43 percent from a year ago in September 2022.

Those prices are back to following the ebbs and flow of travel season, though consumers might still be experiencing some sticker shock:

Airfares: up 0.7 percent from a year ago but 8.1 percent cheaper than in February 2020

Car and truck rental: up 0.7 percent from a year ago, matching some of the biggest increases since 2022, and now 20.8 percent more expensive since the pandemic

Hotels and motels (lodging away from home): down 4.8 percent from last year and 5.1 percent more expensive than before the pandemic

■ Car ownership

Owning a car has been especially pricey since the pandemic, from the cost of the car itself and the interest rates that finance it to the repair and insurance costs required for upkeep. Making car inflation hard to escape, the majority of households (roughly 92 percent) owned at least one car in 2022, according to the Census Bureau.

Motor vehicle insurance: up 5.3 percent from a year ago and 56.6 percent since the start of the pandemic in 2020

Vehicle repair: up 11 percent from a year ago and 58.4 percent since February 2020

New vehicles: up 0.4 percent from a year ago but still 19.8 percent more expensive since February 2020

Used vehicles: up 4.8 percent since July 2024, the biggest increase since September 2022, and 30.5 percent more expensive since the pandemic

Leased vehicles: up 0.2 percent in July from a year ago but 34.2 percent more expensive since the start of the pandemic

The different methods of measuring inflation: PCE versus CPI

Fed policymakers look at the full picture of economic data when setting interest rates. But officially, they prefer a different measure to see whether they're succeeding at controlling inflation: the Department of Commerce's personal consumption expenditures (PCE) index.

Lately, the PCE index has been indicating slower inflation, with overall prices now half a percentage point above the Fed's target (2.6 percent as of June 2025, versus 2.7 percent in the same month for CPI). Excluding food and energy, "core" prices in June are up 2.8 percent from a year ago versus 2.9 percent in BLS' gauge that month.

Those variations have always been afoot. Mainly, they're because of methodology differences. For starters, PCE takes consumers' substitutions into account (for example, one family's decision to buy fish over meat for one month because it's cheaper).

But another key difference is to blame lately. Both agencies estimate an item's relative importance differently, with BLS' gauge giving the most weight to the category of inflation that's coincidentally been the hottest: shelter.

For Fed officials, the story remains largely the same: Inflation has majorly improved since peaking at a 40-year high back in 2022 but is still stubborn.

Takeaways for consumers

Slowing inflation in 2024 gave the Fed room to cut interest rates and consumers a chance to recover some of the purchasing power that they lost. Even so, prices are still higher today than they would've been had the pandemic not occurred, and the Fed remains worried that tariffs could reignite inflation.

■ So long as inflation stays high, so will the borrowing costs you pay: The U.S. central bank's key benchmark interest rate is still higher than at any point since the Great Recession – keeping borrowing costs elevated on the products consumers pay, from credit cards and auto loans to home equity lines of credit (HELOCs).

■ Comparison shop as much as you can: Consumers know to compare offers from multiple lenders before locking in a loan. Why not the same for the items you buy on a regular basis? Compare prices at multiple retailers, see if any stores offer price match and craft a budget. If a product or ingredient pushes your spending goal over the edge, consider swapping it out for something else.

■ Use the personal finance tools at your disposal: Finding the right credit card that helps you earn rewards on the purchases you were already going to make can be another way to pad up your wallet. Just be sure you're not carrying a balance. A 20 percent interest rate will never outweigh the cash back.

■ Save for emergencies and find the right account: Historically, investing in the stock market has been the best way to beat inflation over time, but higher rates mean savers can find a market-like return without any of the risk. Deposit rates have already fallen after the Fed's rate cuts, but returns on high-yielding accounts are still beating inflation. Stash your cash in a high-yield account or add a certificate of deposit (CD) to your portfolio, so you can lock in these elevated yields for the long haul.

Visit Bankrate online at bankrate.com.

FOOD

4 SUMMERY SPRITZ RECIPES YOU CAN MAKE AT HOME

By MEREDITH DEEDS
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Long before becoming a global Instagram sensation, the spritz had humble, effervescent roots in the northern regions of Italy, where locals mastered the art of turning a simple drink into a ritual that embodies la dolce vita.

At its core, the spritz cocktail has become synonymous with effortless elegance and sociable sipping; a celebration of balance, where bitter and sweet flavors meet the playfulness of bubbles. Traditionally, a spritz combines a bitter liqueur, a splash of sparkling wine, soda water and plenty of ice, often garnished with a slice of citrus.

In recent years, the spritz has experienced a renaissance. The Aperol Spritz has dominated cocktail menus and social media feeds, becoming a "drink of the summer" not just in Italian cities, but in cities around the world. Its popularity has been fueled by clever marketing, the drink's versatility and the growing appetite for lower-alcohol cocktails.

Bartenders and home enthusiasts alike have embraced the spritz. It's easy to make and easy to drink. What's not to love?

The spritz can vary by region or bartender, but the modern classic – most famously the Aperol Spritz – follows a simple 3-2-1 ratio: 3 parts prosecco, 2 parts bitter apéritif (like Aperol, Campari or Select) and 1 part soda water.

While the formula is deceptively simple, it disguises a world of creativity.

Tea time

Jake Jarecki, the bar manager at Pink Ivy Kitchen & Bar in Hopkins, Minnesota, puts that creative spark to work by always including a spritz on the restaurant's cocktail menu.

This summer, it's the Earl Grey Duck Spritz, a name inspired by the Minnesota version of the popular children's game. The drink itself, though, is not child's play.

"Whenever I'm developing a spritz for the restaurant, I start out with a really good, well-balanced cocktail," says Jarecki. In this case, that cocktail includes tea-infused vodka, honey syrup and a splash of lemon juice. "Then I turn it into a spritz by adding bubbles."

In almost every spritz, those bubbles are a combination of soda water and prosecco, a nod to the cocktail's Italian roots. And it's usually the bubbles that make the drink refreshing and light, but that's not always the case.

The dark side

At Red Rabbit, you'll find the Midnight Spritz on the extensive spritz menu, and it takes a decidedly darker turn thanks to Italy's wide varieties of amaro – and beverage director Ian Lowther.

Amaro is a bittersweet Italian herbal liqueur known for its complex, often bitter, and slightly sweet flavor profile. It's typically made with a blend of botanicals, including herbs, roots, spices and citrus peels. Each brand of amaro (like Aperol and Campari) has its own recipe, resulting in a wide range of flavors and colors.

"In Italy, amaro can be anywhere from very light to very dark in color and flavor, and Italians drink with the sun," Lowther said. "The darker the sky, the darker the spirit."

Welcome to the Midnight Spritz

Red Rabbit's dark, sexy cocktail starts as most do, with amaro. In this case it's Cynar, which is made with a blend of herbs and plants. But the artichoke (Cynara scolymus) is the most prominent and gives the liqueur its name. Lavender syrup and a little lemon is added, and the drink is topped off with the sparkling red wine Lambrusco instead of prosecco. The result is darker than most spritz cocktails, but still delightfully refreshing, even when the sun is shining.

Combining classics

While the Aperol spritz may be the most popular classic Italian effervescent drink, the negroni might be its most iconic cocktail.

Known for its bitter and sophisticated flavor profile, negronis are typically made with gin, Campari and sweet vermouth, and it makes the perfect base for a spritz. That's why Robb Jones, bar director at ie – Italian Eatery by Travail, includes a Negroni Sbagliato – negroni with bubbles – on the spritz menu. (Jones also owns Meteor bar in Minneapolis.)

"Balance is key to any cocktail, and our negroni is a beautiful balance between alcohol, acidity, sweetness and bitterness," says Jones, who finds bitterness to be one of the most important elements to consider when developing a cocktail. "Without bitterness, every other flavor would be one note. The bitterness pushes the other flavors forward."

Going spirit-free

The term "spritz" can be applied to a wide variety of beverages, and not all have alcohol. At Diane's Place in Minneapolis, you'll find a nonalcoholic rhubarb spritz (called Rhuby Tuesday) on the menu. And it happened organically, as many things do for chef-owner Diane Moua.

When Moua was the lucky recipient of several cases of rhubarb, delivered by her father from his small family farm, she immediately turned that bounty into a spiced rhubarb compote to use in one of her memorable pastries.

To use the compote in baking, Moua had to drain off the excess liquid, which created a flavorful syrup. Not one to let something so tasty go waste, Moua gave the rhubarb syrup to bar manager Sarah Atkinson, who turned it into a sophisticated version of an Italian soda by mixing it with a little lime juice and soda water.

So why turn it into a spritz? "We're all a little dehydrated in the summer," Atkinson says, "and all you really need for a good spritz is a sunny day, a little bit of ice cold bubbles, and maybe a patio."

Which is why, more than any other drink, a good spritz tastes like the essence of summer. A spritz offers more than refreshment – it invites a pause, a moment of connection and a taste of la dolce vita, whether you're enjoying a late afternoon aperitivo in Rome or at a backyard patio with these DIY recipes for Earl Grey Duck Spritz, Midnight Spritz, Negroni Sbagliato and Rhuby Tuesday Spritz.

Pink Ivy's Earl Grey Duck Spritz
Makes 1 cocktail

While this fun and inventive cocktail from Jake Jarecki at Pink Ivy takes a couple of steps to make, they are both ultra quick and easy and well worth the effort.

6 to 8 blueberries
3 tbsp. (1.5 oz.) Earl Grey vodka (see recipe)
2 tbsp. (1 oz.) honey syrup (see recipe)
1 1/2 tbsp. (.75 oz.) lemon juice
4 tbsp. (2 oz.) prosecco
Soda water
Lemon slice, for garnish

Muddle the blueberries in a cocktail shaker. Add the vodka, honey syrup and lemon juice and several ice cubes and shake for 10 seconds. Pour into a wine glass. Add more ice, pour in the prosecco and top with soda water. Garnish with a slice of lemon.

Earl Grey Vodka
Makes 1 liter

Feel free to cut this recipe for tea-infused vodka in half, but keep in mind that any leftovers could change your Arnold Palmer game forever!

1 liter vodka
8 bags Earl Grey tea

Pour vodka into a pitcher. Add tea bags and steep for 20 minutes. Remove and discard tea bags.

Honey Syrup
Makes 1 cup

1/2 c. honey
1/2 c. hot water

In a measuring cup, stir together the honey and hot water until well combined. Cool.

Lavender Syrup
Makes about 2 1/4 cups

1 c. water
2 c. sugar
2 tbsp. dried lavender flowers

Bring water to a boil and add sugar. Stir until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat and stir in lavender flowers. Chill in refrigerator overnight. Strain out lavender flowers and store syrup in an airtight glass container in the refrigerator.

IE's Negroni Sbagliato
Makes 1 cocktail

For a spritz that couldn't be easier or more refreshing, look no further than Italian Eatery's version of this classic cocktail from Robb Jones.

1 tbsp. (.5 oz.) Campari
1 tbsp. (.5 oz.) London dry gin
2 tbsp. (1 oz.) Italian sweet vermouth
Prosecco
Soda water
Orange peel

Pour the Campari, gin and vermouth into an ice-filled wine glass. Top with prosecco and soda water, to taste. Squeeze a 1-inch strip of orange peel over the glass and drop into the cocktail as garnish.

Diane's Place Rhuby Tuesday Spritz
Makes 1 cocktail

You won't miss the alcohol in the light and fruity NA spritz from Sarah Atkinson of Diane's Place.

1.5 oz rhubarb syrup (see below)
0.75 lime juice
Soda water

Mix the rhubarb syrup and lime juice together in a wine glass. Add ice and top with soda water. Garnish with a spoonful of the cooked rhubarb (from the syrup) or a slice of lime.

Rhubarb Syrup
Makes about 1 cup

Diane's Place uses the leftover syrup from making their rhubarb compote. It has cinnamon, ginger, coriander, vanilla and orange zest in the mix. Feel free to add any or all of these ingredients to the pot while you're cooking your syrup. Or experiment with your own favorite flavors.

4 c. chopped rhubarb
1 c. granulated sugar
1 c. water

Combine rhubarb, sugar and water together in a medium-sized saucepan and bring to a boil. Lower the heat to a simmer and cook gently, stirring occasionally, until the fruit is soft and the liquid has thickened slightly, about 20 minutes.

Set a fine-mesh strainer over a large bowl. Pour the rhubarb through the strainer until most of the liquid is in the bowl. Press the solids a little with the back of a spoon to extract more syrup.

If desired, save the cooked rhubarb to use for baking or as a garnish for the drink. Store syrup in an airtight glass container in the refrigerator.

Red Rabbit's Midnight Spritz
Makes 1 cocktail

Looking for a unique spritz that incorporates a dark, full-flavored amaro? This drink recipe from Ian Lowther of Red Rabbit has you covered with a spritz that's as lovely to look at as it is to drink. Cynar is an Italian apéritif and is widely available.

4 tsp. (.66 oz.) lavender syrup (see recipe)
4 tsp. (.66 oz.) lemon juice
2 tbsp. (1 oz.) Cynar
1/2 c. (4 oz.) Lambrusco
3 tbsp. (1 1/1 oz.) soda water
Lemon wheel, for garnish

Mix the lavender syrup, lemon juice and Cynar together in a wine glass, add ice. Top with Lambrusco and soda water. Garnish with a lemon wheel.

ABOVE: The Negroni Sbagliato, made with sweet vermouth, Campari and topped with prosecco and an orange twist, at Italian Eatery in Minneapolis. **LEFT:** The Midnight Spritz, made with amaro, sparkling red wine, lavender and lemon, at Red Rabbit in Minneapolis, Minn. on July 8. Photos by Leila Navidi

Jonathan Ajayi (left) plays Smee and Timothy Olyphant portrays Kirsh in the new version of "Alien," called "Alien: Earth" and streaming on Hulu. New episodes are being introduced every Tuesday on Hulu and FX.
Patrick Brown / FX / TNS.

Creator Noah Hawley examines humanness amid terror in *'Alien: Earth'*

By LUAINE LEE
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Those who were frightened out of their skin when "Alien" burst to life in 1979 are in for another chill. Hulu is streaming the newest iteration of the "Alien" franchise called "Alien: Earth."

This one is commandeered by writer Noah Hawley, best known for his icy characters from "Fargo."

The movie "Alien," directed by Ridley Scott, was so scary that it metastasized dozens of genetic offspring, with another "Aliens" in 1986 directed by James Cameron (famous for "Titanic" and "The Terminator"). "Alien 3" morphed in 1992, directed by David Fincher, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet followed that with "Alien Resurrection." Prequels ensued as well with "Alien: Romulus" last year, directed by Fede Alvarez.

These stories are perpetually popular, says Hawley, because people like to view the future as both promising and fearful. "I think if you asked the people who have created the technology that we're using now, they were all the sci-fi nerds of their high school. So, it's the job of the fiction writers and the sci-fi writers to project a future that we can then accomplish (these projections) over time. I think we go through phases, where the stories are dystopian or they're hopeful," he says.

You have, '2001: A Space Odyssey,' then you have 'Star Wars,' right? And then you have 'Alien.' And it's like, I don't know, in 'Star Wars,' things are looking up; in 'Alien,' things are looking down. So, my responsibility in bringing 'Alien' to the small screen is really to try to create a vision of the future in a way that the characters in the show are working through this question of what does it mean to be human? And can humanity survive its own sins that maybe brings some optimism to the world?"

Of course, the terror exploded in the first "Alien" when the creature, the Xenomorph, burst out of John Hurt's chest. Those who suffered that scene can never forget it.

"I could talk a little bit about the origin," says Hawley, "which is, if my job is to render the emotional experience of watching 'Alien' into a new delivery system – which is this television show – then one of the critical feelings is the discovery of the life-cycle of the Xenomorph.

"I mean, it's really four monsters in one," he continues. "And each step is worse than the last. And so, part of the horror ... is first, it's a facehugger, which is terrible. And then you think, 'Oh, that's over,' and ... and then something bursts out of your chest. So, there's this discovery process that, after seven movies, we can't get back.

"But if I introduce new creatures and you don't know how they reproduce or what they eat, then you feel that dread every time they're on screen. Or they're not visible, but you know they're out there because you're not sure what's going to happen next.

"And for me, it was really just function over form. What function do they need to provide in the story? And then I just tried to gross myself out as much as possible as I went through the process," he says.

"What I'm sort of proudest of is that I was able to give the actors the real experience. They knew what they were acting against. They knew what these creatures were. And I think for the audience, we're really giving you that feeling that you got from watching 'Alien' back (then)."

Some of the actors in "Alien: Earth" remember when they first experienced the original. Babou Ceesay, who plays Morrow, the only survivor of the ship's crash, recalls, "When I saw it way too early, I was 9 or 10 in Africa watching it on a French TV channel, actually. My mom corrected me, because I thought it was on VHS, but it was on a French TV channel. It wasn't dubbed. It was in English, but it had the subtitles, and it freaked me out a lot. The chest burster moment was the moment, I think that was almost too real. And then meeting a real Xenomorph on set – a real Xenomorph, can you believe that?"

Sydney Chandler, who portrays Wendy, the first "synthetic" to be imbued with human consciousness, remembers, "I saw this movie also at too young of an age, and the Xenomorph visited me in my nightmares many a time. So, it was a full circle moment to be chased by a real Xeno instead of just dreaming about it."

Ridley Scott, executive producer on the series, remains Hawley's mentor. "It was Ridley who made 'Alien' and then went on to make' Blade Runner,' right? He introduced this idea of synthetic beings, and then he went on to explore that in more depth in 'Blade Runner.'

"By exploring the synthetic beings in 'Alien,' I'm certainly not trying to make' Blade Runner,' but I understand how the comparisons can be made, certainly aesthetically," says Hawley.

"You could look at 'Blade Runner' and think, 'Well, that must be what Earth looks like in "Alien." It's raining all the time,' etc. But I would say to the department heads, if you find yourself making 'Blade Runner,' you're making the wrong Ridley Scott movie."

Old pros join 'Murder Club'

If you missed it in the theaters, now is the time to catch "The Thursday Murder Club," a comedy-thriller starring the old pros Helen Mirren, Ben Kingsley and Pierce Brosnan. This is a formidable gang of aged crime stoppers who set their walkers to work on solving cold cases. The film begins streaming on Netflix Aug. 28.

Mirren, so memorable in "1923" and everything else she's done, tells me, "I think I started off quite shy, and I'm still not hugely gregarious. One of the things I like about acting is you don't have to think what to say – it's all written for you, which is kind of nice. I think also it fits in with my philosophy of life, the world you engage in as an actor is quite loose, quite liberal; it's quite varied, it's quite funky for want of a better word. You get to mix with people with all kinds of different attitudes and races. It's an inclusive profession. It's more inclusive than most professions, and I love never quite knowing what I'm going to be doing next."

Ron Howard lands east of 'Eden'

Director Ron Howard delivers another memorable film with "Eden," landing in theaters on Friday. It's the tale of a disgruntled group that tries to set up a new society on a remote island – only to have things go awry. The film stars Jude Law and Ana de Armas. Howard, who has helmed a score of successful movies, tells me, "I'm not a genius but in some ways my life has, at times, made me feel like an outsider and not a member of the mainstream. ...

"One of the things that attracts me to a story is that possibility or the reality of a real and surprising and shocking loss and the way that changes your life and how you try to cope with that.

"I've dealt with it comedically. 'Parenthood' is about the belief that you think you know how to be the greatest parent and control something, and the realization that you can't, and what the toll is going to be. 'Apollo 13' is clearly about that. I think you can find that in 'Ransom' and even In 'Cocoon' – they've lost their way, who they were and sense of purpose. And it's certainly there in 'A Beautiful Mind.'"

Denzel stars in a classic remake

Most people would not connect Denzel Washington with the great Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. But lucky viewers can watch Washington star as a music mogul in "Highest 2 Lowest" in select theaters now and on Apple TV+ on Sept. 5.

The film is based on Kurosawa's classic crime thriller "High and Low" and reunites Washington with director Spike Lee for the fifth time. "Yeah, we just go," says Washington of Lee. "It is a shorthand. I like working with Spike. It's familiar territory."

Miller Mobley / FX / TNS
Noah Hawley, who transformed the Coen Brothers' film "Fargo" to a TV series on FX, created the new version of "Alien" called "Alien: Earth" streaming on Hulu. New episodes are released Tuesdays on Hulu and FX.

Washington admits that he takes something of each role with him. "They all become a part of you," he says. "I'd like to say I'm doing something different. I'm just blessed to have had so many great experiences and to have traveled the world. I think going to Africa, the first time, had the biggest impact on me. 'Cry Freedom' because of my age, landing in Africa. They opened the door, and I thought, 'Wow, Africa smells strong.'"

In spite of his success, Washington says, "Any film you do is a gamble. You never know. The more ammunition you have going in – if it ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage. So if you have a good script to begin with. I can't think of very many films I've been in where we had a great script and screwed it up. I've been in a couple where we didn't have anything and maybe we patched it together a little bit."

Luaine Lee is a California-based correspondent who covers entertainment for Tribune News Service.

Allyson Riggs / Netflix

Vanessa Kirby as Lynette in "Night Always Comes."

MOVIE REVIEW

Vanessa Kirby can't save bleak crime drama *'Night Always Comes'*

By MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald, Willoughby, Ohio (TNS)

The crime drama "Night Always Comes" attempts to shine a light on the economic disparity in this country.

That's admirable, but the film from director Benjamin Caron – an adaptation of Willy Vlautin's novel "The Night Always Comes" debuting this month on Netflix – does so quite inelegantly.

In the film's first few minutes, the lead character, Vanessa Kirby's Lynette, drives by the homeless in the streets of Portland, Oregon, as heavy-handed, almost surely fictional news reports drone on about rising costs and frozen wages.

You'd think that maybe she'd eventually change the channel, given that Lynette certainly is feeling the crush of financial strain. Working two jobs, she stands at the precipice of losing the small house in which much of her troubled adolescence took place.

It is now home for her – as well as her older brother, Kenny (Zack Gottsagen, "The Peanut Butter Falcon"), who suffers from developmental disabilities, and her mother, Doreen (Jennifer Jason Leigh, "The Hateful Eight") – but she does not own it.

With $25,000 from Doreen, Lynette will sign papers giving her the in-need-of-some-love structure, but Mom is a no-show at the meeting with the seller and an attorney. Turns out that instead of going to said meeting, Doreen was enticed by a Mazda sale and used the money as the sizable down payment on a sporty white number.

While Lynette is, understandably, furious, the seemingly obtuse Doreen is unsympathetic toward her daughter and dismissive of anger – an example of the kind of sophomoric storytelling that plagues "Night Always Comes."

We are given the impression that Lynette has come a long way from the type of behavior that earlier had landed her in trouble and cost her employment. Nevertheless, she decides she must do whatever she can to acquire the $25K before a rescheduled meeting with the house's owner first thing in the morning.

'Night Always Comes'

★ ½

MPA rating: R (for language throughout, some sexual content, drug content and violence)

Running time: 1:48

How to watch: Netflix

She begins by trying to squeeze a loan out of a businessman, Scott (Randall Park, "Fresh Off the Boat"), who sometimes pays her for sex. Instead, he doubles the usual amount he pays her – to $1,000 – as a parting gift. More importantly, he forgets the key fob to his Mercedes in their hotel room, so she steals it without, it would seem, much of a plan for how to turn it into the money she needs.

Next is a visit to an escort friend, Gloria (Julia Fox, "Uncut Gems"), shacked up in the luxury apartment of a well-to-do individual. Gloria owes her money, but, when she refuses to give Lynette all of it, the latter hatches a plan to steal the safe from which her friend had retrieved some cash.

She recruits the help of a reluctant coworker and ex-con, Cody (Stephan James), who believes he knows where they can take the hefty locked container.

From here, Lynette becomes increasingly desperate – and, as a result, the narrative grows more and more depressing – our protagonist eventually encountering other unsavory types portrayed by Michael Kelly ("House of Cards") and Eli Roth ("Inglourious Basterds").

Penned by Sarah Conradt, "Night Always Comes" eventually fills in some of the blanks regarding Lynette's tragic and traumatic past, and the character seems to care deeply about Kenny staying out of government-ordered care.

All of that, and given the fact that Kirby ("The Fantastic Four: First Steps," "Pieces of a Woman") is an extremely talented actor, should lead the viewer becoming relatively invested in Lynette. It's simply tough to get there, though, seeing the choices she makes, even while acknowledging the circumstances.

The strongest performance is turned in by James ("Race," "If Beale Street Could Talk"), who comes the closest to tapping into something that is convincingly emotional. If we struggle to muster empathy for Lynette, we do dig up some, if not a ton, for Cody.

With several episodes of "The Crown" to his credit, as well as a few installments of the excellent "Star Wars" series "Andor," Caron's previous film was the predictable 2023 con drama "Sharper." Disappointingly, "Night Always Comes" is a step down from that, the director never succeeding in the admittedly tall task of finding a way to make a story like this one engrossing.

Ultimately, if "Night Always Comes" has a message, it's perhaps that for many facing economic uncertainties, things are hopeless.

True as that may be, we'd hoped for something more.

SERIES REVIEW

Combine Pedro Almodóvar with stop motion and you get Adult Swim's most unexpected yet perfect show

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

In the annals of things I could not have seen coming, none has been more unexpected than "Women Wearing Shoulder Pads," a queer Spanish-language stop-motion comedy melodrama, set in the aesthetic world of a 1980s Pedro Almodóvar film. (It arrived Sunday on Adult Swim, the home of things one doesn't see coming, and premiered the next day on HBO Max.)

Though it takes place in Ecuador, its central character, Marioneta Negocios (Pepa Pallarés), is Spanish, and it's easy enough to imagine Almodóvar muse Carmen Maura in the role – though it is also impossible to imagine the story told as well, or at all, in any other way. When I call this series perfect, notwithstanding the happy imperfections of its puppets and sets, it's not because everything works as it's meant to, but because there's nothing you can measure it against – it occupies its own self-created space. Every element is necessary. Even presenting it in English would be to lose romantic, dramatic, telenovelistic force.

At the center of the story is the cuy, a guinea pig eaten in Andean South America, though in this telling they're also used in a version of bullfighting. (Some cuys are large enough to ride on.) The primary action is a power struggle between Marioneta, a socialite running a campaign promoting cuy as pets, not food, and Doña Quispe (Laura Torres), who has risen from life as a humble butcher to the anything-but-humble CEO of the country's most famous restaurant, El Cuchillo (the knife).

Courtesy of Adult Swim / TNS

"Women Wearing Shoulder Pads," a stop-motion series created by Gonzalo Cordova, is entirely in Spanish, adding to its force.

Mixed up in their lives are Coquita Buenasuerte (Gabriela Cartol), Marioneta's seemingly happy-go-lucky assistant; Espada Muleta (Kerygma Flores), a matadora in love with Marioneta; Nina (Nicole Vazquez), Doña Quispe's vegetarian daughter, serving a pro-cuy group as its Minister of Refreshments and Head of Recruitment for Rebellious Teens – "I have looked upon the caged cuy through the prison of capitalist enterprise, through the hubristic iron bars of a homocentric world view" – who will become a pawn in the older women's game.

Not everything will be as it seems.

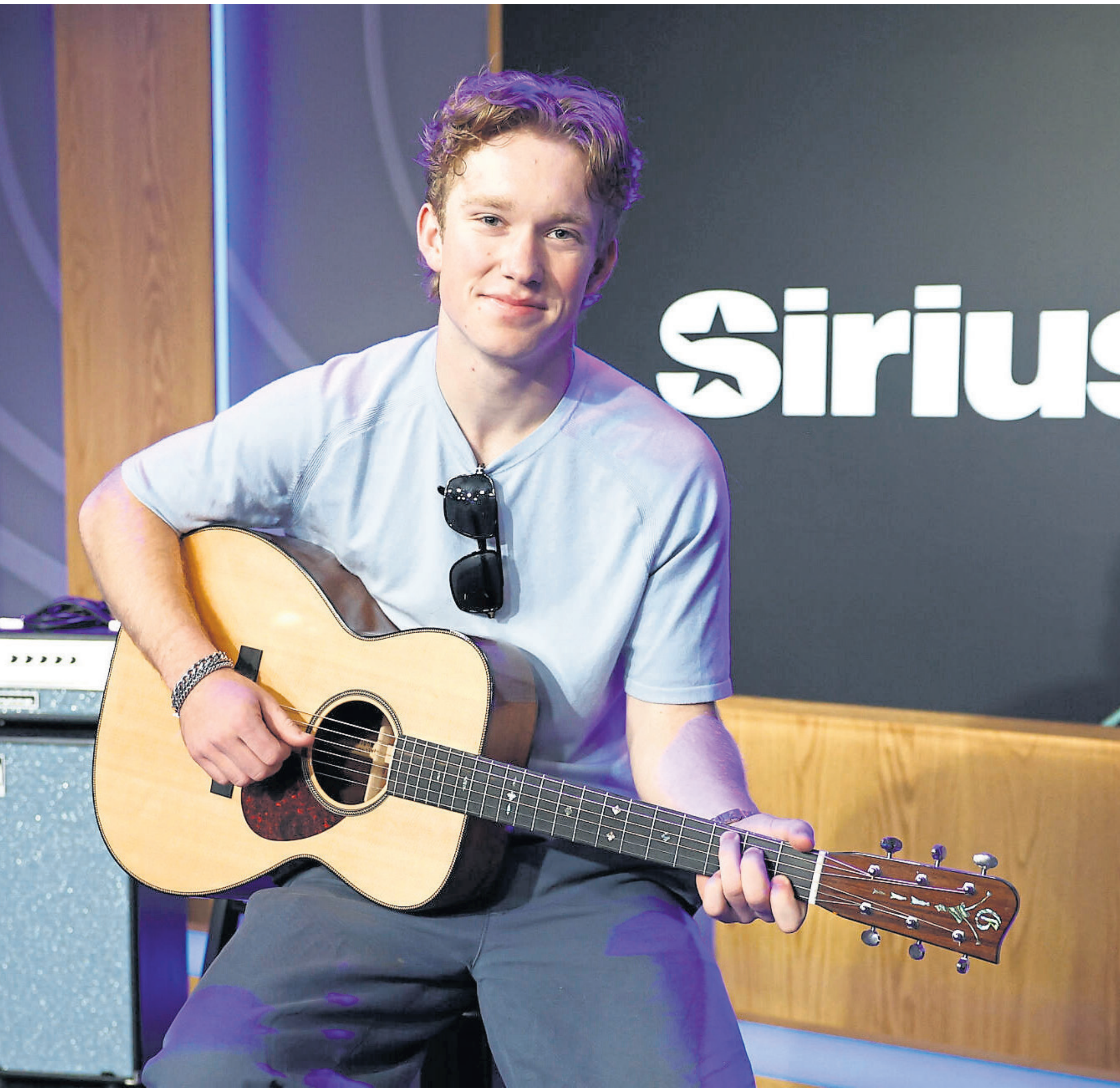
Created by Gonzalo Cordova (a veteran of "Tuca & Bertie" and "Adam Ruins Everything") and produced by the Mexican animation studio Cinema Fantasma, the series comes packaged as eight 11-minute episodes – that is cartoon length – which neatly constitute a short feature film. On the bill are mystery, suspense, terror, revenge, hot romance (including some puppet sex), masked stalkers, performance art, love notes posted with knives, parodies of television shows and commercials, old secrets coming to light and nuns singing karaoke.

'Women Wearing Shoulder Pads'

Rating: TV-MA

How to watch: Adult Swim (streaming on HBO Max)

From "Gumby" to "Rudolph" to "Wallace and Gromit" to "The Fantastic Mr. Fox," stop motion is of all forms of animation most magical and in its real-space, three-dimensional, handcrafted way the most like life, if not necessarily the most lifelike. (It can look ungainly, which is also part of its charm.) It's a magnification of childhood playtime, a puppet show in which the puppets have broken loose from the puppeteers. The cleverness of the execution is as or more important than how seamless it is. "Women Wearing Shoulder Pads" does all sorts of neat tricks, some you notice and more you simply accept – and when deemed necessary, or just amusing, it will insert a live-action hand or mouth. It's an exaggerated world – appropriately to the heavy-breathing material – but emotionally expressive, even moving, and lots of fun.



Ty Myers visits SiriusXM Studios on June 13 in Nashville, Tennessee.

Jason Kempin / Getty Images / TNS

Meet Ty Myers, Gen Z *blues guitarist* turned *TikTok country heartthrob*

By MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Among the half-dozen tattoos Ty Myers has accumulated in his 18 years on earth, "probably the dumbest," he says, is the armadillo he picked out from a set of ready-mades at a festival in Oklahoma.

"They had like 20 options they could do quick," the singer and songwriter from Austin, Texas, says with a shrug.

Myers has a plan to improve the tattoo, though, next time he's home in the city where his hero Willie Nelson famously found renewal in the early 1970s at the Armadillo World Headquarters.

"I'm gonna add a red bandanna and put Willie braids on it," he says – a music nerd's reference to the fabled honky-tonk that shuttered nearly three decades before he was born.

Myers, whose other tattoos include the name Leroy (after Jim Croce's "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown") and the logo of Muscle Shoals, Alabama's FAME Studios, is a young person with vintage tastes. His 2025 debut album, "The Select" – its title nods to the Parisian brasserie from Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" – puts bluesy guitar riffs against low-slung soul-rock grooves, as in the twangy "Let 'Em Talk" and the waltz-time "Ends of the Earth," which has been streamed more than 70 million times on Spotify and is slowly moving up the country radio chart.

Yet the singer has built his growing audience the new-fashioned way. In 2023, not long after he started posting music online, his song "Tie That Binds" went viral on TikTok; these days, the platform is filled with videos of teenage girls, many even younger than Myers, screaming along with him at concerts like the one he played recently after a Royals game at Kansas City's Kauffman Stadium.

His latest single: a stately '70s-style ballad called "Through a Screen" about falling in love with someone you've never met in the flesh.

"I knew ya'll would relate to this one," he wrote on TikTok in one of the many, many videos that teased the song before its release Aug. 15.

As a clean-cut heartthrob type, Myers stands out somewhat in the country scene, which has been dominated over the last few years by the burly, bearded likes of Luke Combs and Jelly Roll and, of course, by Morgan Wallen, whose lightly villainous bad-boy energy is as crucial to his popularity as his knack for a deviously catchy hook. In Myers' music, which he writes mostly himself, even the drinking songs feel pretty suave; he's always using his dreamy eyes to beam a gentlemanly sincerity.

"I don't think I've ever tried to be seen that way," he says with a laugh over coffee at the Chateau Marmont during a recent swing through Los Angeles. "Obviously, when I'm onstage doing the flirtatious stuff and it gets a reaction – that's all part of it. And I love clothes – style definitely plays into it too. But that's never been at the forefront of my mind."

Even so, one of the music industry veterans behind Myers acknowledges that he was "seeking a gap in the marketplace" when he signed the singer to his label.

"Everything in country was feeling a little mature," says Barry Weiss, who founded the company he calls simply Records after heading up the Jive and RCA labels in the late '90s and early 2000s. "You're trying to hit the ball where they ain't. And I felt like there wasn't a male country artist who's really young and really appealing to young folks."

Why not? "Generally speaking, the Nashville community is very purist," Weiss says. "The minute someone feels young, it means they don't have musical credibility, which is so not the case with Ty. I mean, he's basically John Mayer and Otis Redding in an 18-year-old's body."

That's perhaps an overstatement. But it's true that Myers backs up his fresh-faced good looks and his cutesy social media content with real chops. His guitar playing is casually assured, and his voice has a weary scrape beyond his years; as a songwriter, he knows how to punctuate a story with a burst of emotional detail, as in his song "Help Ourselves," where he and a duet partner, Harper O'Neill, play a couple stuck – if that's the word for it – in a toxic relationship.

"This ain't no goodbye/ You'll come crawling back when you've had your fill," Myers sings, bruised but still steady. "I'll get a call in the night at half past 12/ Three months later, I should f--- myself." (Hey, he's a good guy, not a choirboy.)

Myers grew up in Dripping Springs, Texas, as part of a musical family that includes a great-uncle who co-founded the band Lonestar and another great-uncle who plays keys for George Strait. By elementary school, he was known around town as a singer – "I vividly remember my PE teacher making me get up and sing 'Check Yes or No' for the whole gymnasium," he says of the old Strait hit – and at 11 or 12 he discovered Stevie Ray Vaughan on YouTube.

"It was 'Lenny' from 'Live at the El Mocambo,'" he says, referring to the blues-rock star's classic concert film. "I was like, 'That's what I want to do.'"

Playing guitar and writing songs became "a borderline addiction," as Myers puts it, that he squeezed between going to school and playing football and baseball, the latter of which he described as "a way of life in Texas." Yet a sports injury in his sophomore year – "Blew my knee out and tore everything: ACL, MCL, meniscus, PLC" – took him off the field. Myers' mom made him a TikTok profile to help focus his attention on something else; his sister, he says, became "the mastermind" of his online presence.

The "Tie That Binds" video blew up while the family was on vacation in Key West, Florida; Myers recalls an instant deluge of queries from record labels and management companies, including Nashville's Starstruck Entertainment, the firm headed up by Narvel Blackstock, who was married to Reba McEntire from 1989 to 2015.

"My mom obviously grew up watching Lonestar on the CMAs and the ACMs, and she remembers every time Reba would win an award, they'd pan to her and Narvel right next to her and pop his name up on the screen," Myers says. "So they knew who he was." (Blackstock's son Brandon, who worked with his father and had two children with his ex-wife, Kelly Clarkson, died this month of cancer at age 48.) Myers signed with Starstruck, whose other management clients include Blake Shelton and Carly Pearce, then spent about a year taking meetings with labels.

"I think we met with all of them," Myers says. "By the end, I was about done with meetings."

Weiss recalls flying to Austin to meet with the singer and his parents. "The mom recognized my name because she saw me written up in the Britney Spears book," says the exec, who helped shepherd Spears, NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys to stardom. "That can cut both ways, but it turned out to be a huge positive, because she's a Britney fan."

Myers says he went with Weiss' company, which signed the singer in a joint deal with Columbia Records, in part because Weiss understands "how to use youth in a way that propels you instead of it being like, 'Well, he's really young …'"

Though Weiss predicts that "Ends of the Earth" will end up a top 5 record at country radio – "if not a No. 1 record," he says – both he and Myers are thinking bigger than the country audience. "We're talking about girls in Greenwich, Connecticut, coming to these shows," the exec says.

Yet "trying to make super-commercial pop records – that would be the kiss of death," according to Weiss. Myers has been recording his next album at FAME, the studio known as the cradle of the so-called Muscle Shoals sound popularized by Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and Etta James. And he's playing more gigs on the road this year than he ever has – 109 at last count. It's a number he's thinking of commemorating with one more tattoo, maybe when he fixes his armadillo, since he can get it done legally in Texas now after turning 18 last month.

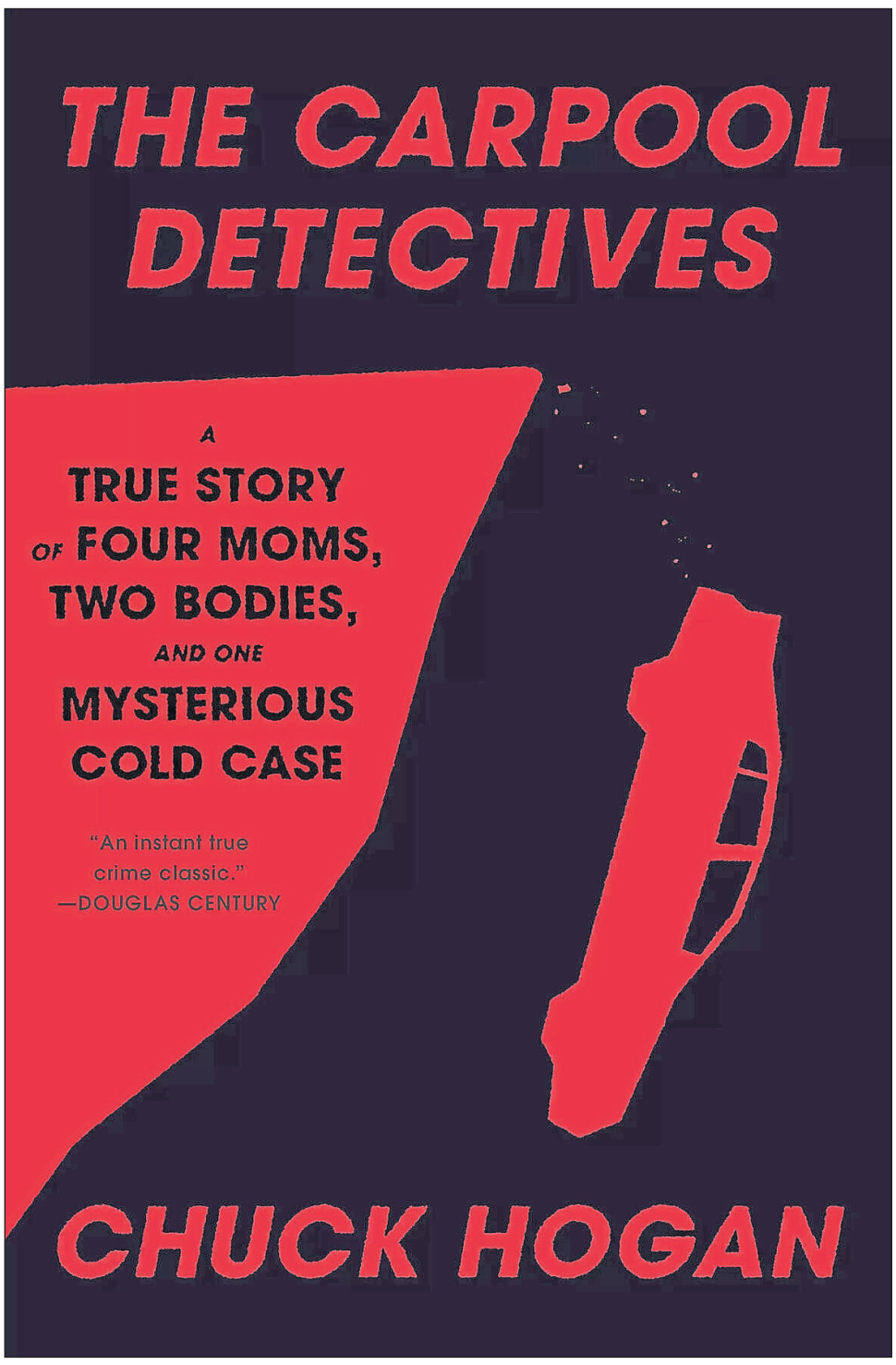
"Some places are tough with it," he says. "We called a shop in Austin a while back: 'Hey, it's a 17-year-old – think you can do it?' They were like, 'No, that's child endangerment.'" He laughs. "'Jesus, I got two months, then you'll do it, no question.'"

BOOKS

These LA moms solved a cold case murder

It 'revolutionized' their lives

By DIANE GARRETT
Los Angeles Times (TNS)


THE CARPOOL DETECTIVES
A TRUE STORY OF FOUR MOMS, TWO BODIES, AND ONE MYSTERIOUS COLD CASE
"An instant true crime classic."
—DOUGLAS CENTURY
CHUCK HOGAN

Random House / TNS

LOS ANGELES — "The Carpool Detectives," a true crime mystery that reads like a novel, begins in the liminal moment before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the country and concludes on an upbeat note two and a half years later: Four L.A. moms with no law enforcement training have solved an icy cold case and moved on to their next, buoyed by newfound purpose.

But as Chuck Hogan's book and conversations with the unlikely crime solvers today make clear, there were plenty of bumps along the way – from dead ends to a potential intruder at one of their homes mid-investigation.

"We went through phases where we felt like we hit a wall," says Marissa Pianko, a former forensic accountant. Pianko first learned about the stalled investigation into an older couple's death during a journalism class and became determined to get to the bottom of it, inviting three acquaintances to help solve the case. "I think each one of us had a time by which we were like, 'OK, are we really continuing with this?'"

"There were lots of ups and downs," concurs Nicole Landset Blank, a political opposition research pro turned book researcher who is seated at the very same table in Pianko's backyard where the team figured out the perpetrator of a double homicide.

Samira Poulos, a puzzle-loving digital advertising project manager who stepped back from her career when she became a mom, and Jeannie Wilkinson, a former entertainment industry research exec, both nod their heads in agreement as their fellow sleuths describe the sometimes-fraught nature of their first investigation.

The quartet is still a bit apprehensive about solving a case that involved organized crime and is worried that the book might expose their families to harm. To get around their concerns, some of the details about the case have been changed in "The Carpool Detectives" and each of the four detectives is referred to by first name, like a character in a novel. Reading along, it can be easy to forget that the underlying case is based on real, not fictional, murder.

The basic details of the cold case at the heart of "The Carpool Detectives" are this: An older couple living a seemingly comfortable life in the L.A. suburbs mysteriously disappeared a couple decades ago. Victims of an apparent road accident, their bodies were found a few months later near their wrecked SUV in a mountainous area. After more than a year, the L.A. County Sheriff's Dept. moved the vehicle due to evidence that the couple's death was suspicious. Although the investigation was covered in the media, it soon faded away.

Until, that is, four moms – who became such close friends that they now can finish each other's sentences – started looking into the case a decade later. As "The Carpool Detectives" recounts, the women sought out the help of sometimes-reluctant police officers and the victims' family members, bumbling at times as newbie investigators. Many dead ends and a visit to the crime scene later, the women finally figured out whodunnit.

"It was two and a half years before we really broke it, and it was completely different than we thought it was going to be in the beginning," Pianko says.

"And how law enforcement thought it would be," Landset Blank says.

For Wilkinson, the biggest surprise was law enforcement's reaction upon hearing that the mom squad had cracked the case. "I feel like we really did truly earn respect," she says, exuding pleasure at the thought.

The book chronicling their investigation grew out of another pandemic dynamic: socially distanced get-togethers with pals. "We had a friend who, during the COVID time, we would meet in the driveway for drinks or whatever, and she said, 'This would make an amazing story,'" Poulos recalls.

This being L.A., that friend mentioned the quartet's investigation to her boss at the production company 3 Arts Entertainment, and a podcast was discussed before a book deal was put together. The challenge: finding an author who could nail the crime-solving narrative while changing some of the details for privacy and security reasons. The women met with some writers, but nobody clicked until Hogan.

Hogan was at a cocktail party before the 2023 Edgar Awards, where he was nominated for his last novel, "Gangland," when his literary agent told him about the project and stipulations associated with it.

"I said, 'You need someone like me, who knows crimes and can get creative,'" recalls Hogan, who co-created FX's "The Strain" with Guillermo del Toro and wrote the book that inspired the Ben Affleck film "The Town." Though he had never written nonfiction before, he was looking for a challenge, and the project intrigued him. After meeting with the women in L.A., he realized the underlying story about the women that solved the case was more resonant than the crime itself.

"It's a story of four women who really found themselves at a crossroads in life – as many people do – and this search for identity that manifested itself in this cold case investigation that they then went on to incredibly solve, a case that the police hadn't been able to crack," Hogan says in a Zoom conversation from his home in the Boston area. "This is a one-of-a-kind story."

To do it justice, he met with the women and their families, retracing some of their investigative steps during a one-week visit. "We took him to the scene of the crime," Pianko says. "Took him to a couple of different locations where we went looking for blood splatter –"

"Our favorite seafood restaurant," interjects Landset Blank with a less bloody location.

Next, the women "gifted" Hogan all their information about the case. That included extensive research and saved texts, but no recordings or social media documentation. Their copious documentation proved invaluable to Hogan, who could get incredibly specific in some places and lean on creativity as needed elsewhere. "I had literally reams of information and rough timelines via text messages that they had saved, and all sorts of things," says the author.

Then it was a matter of shaping all that information – about the case and the individual women – into a compelling narrative. "There were a lot more dead ends and red herrings that would bog down readers," Hogan observes.

The newbie crime solvers – and their families – undeniably experienced some rough patches over the course of their sleuthing, but none of them were daunting enough to deter them from diving into another investigation when a detective they had been working with brought over a trunk full of possibilities. Now, with "The Carpool Detectives" in bookstores, the crime solvers are closing in on a suspect for an even bigger case – this one involving a potential serial killer of around 20 women during the 1970s and '80s. The choice of time frame and the victims' gender were both deliberate.

"Let's take this case that's about women and try to get some closure and justice for them," Poulos says they decided.

Victims being unidentified was another reason why the women wanted to take on the case, Wilkinson continues. Beyond that, "it felt safe," due to the potential age of the killer this many decades later.

Whatever happens with their second case, Pianko is glad she saw that news clip about the missing couple in her journalism class pre-COVID. Solving the case "really revolutionized my life," she says, admitting to being simultaneously excited and nervous about the Random House book's impending release, given some personal details included in it. "It changed the entire trajectory of my life – it gave me meaning in a way that I hadn't had meaning in a long time."

"These three women have become like family," notes Landset Blank, who earlier this year leaned on the trio when her family's house burned down in the Palisades fire. "We went through a lot more than just solving the case."

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Aug. 9, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. The Fallen & the Kiss of Dusk. Carissa Broadbent. Bramble
2. Scarred (collector's ed.). Emily McIntire. Bloom
3. Atmosphere. Taylor Jenkins Reid. Ballantine
4. Not Quite Dead Yet. Holly Jackson. Bantam
5. Onyx Storm. Rebecca Yarros. Red Tower
6. My Friends. Fredrik Backman. Atria
7. Never Flinch. Stephen King. Scribner
8. An Inside Job. Daniel Silva. Harper
9. Broken Country. Clare Leslie Hall. Simon & Schuster
10. The Hamptons Lawyer. Patterson/Lupica. Little, Brown

Hardcover nonfiction

1. The Let Them Theory. Mel Robbins. Hay House
2. The Complete Cook's Country TV Show Cookbook. America's Test Kitchen
3. On Power. Mark R. Levin. Threshold
4. Don't Believe Everything You Think (expanded ed.). Joseph Nguyen. Authors Equity
5. Disney Adults. AJ Wolfe. Gallery
6. The Idaho Four. Patterson/Ward. Little, Brown
7. Help in a Hurry. Caroline Leaf. Baker
8. The Devil Reached Toward the Sky. Garrett M. Graff. Avid Reader
9. Are You Mad at Me? Meg Josephson. Gallery
10. Joyspan. Kerry Burnight. Worthy

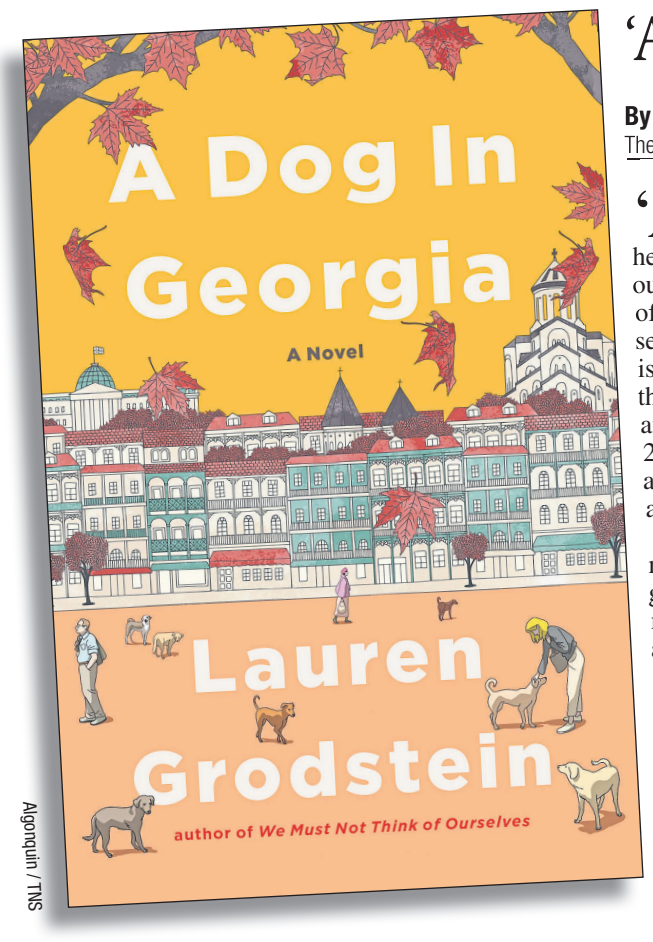
Trade paperback

1. Accomplice to the Villain. Hannah Nicole Maehrer. Red Tower
2. Do Not Disturb. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
3. Lights Out. Navessa Allen. Slowburn
4. One Golden Summer. Carley Fortune. Berkley
5. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco
6. The Tenant. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
7. Caught Up. Navessa Allen. Slowburn
8. The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store. James McBride. Riverhead
9. Fourth Wing. Rebecca Yarros. Red Tower
10. Standing on the Edge of Eternity. Gary Hamrick. Harvest House

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

'A Dog in Georgia' is a banger about rebooting your life



Algonquin / TNS

By MARION WINIK
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

"A Dog in Georgia" is Lauren Grodstein's sixth novel under her own name, following the breakout success of "We Must Not Think of Ourselves," a World War II novel set in Warsaw. The current narrative is also set in Eastern Europe – it's that Georgia – but the history that affects the plot is much more recent: 2023's wave of large-scale protests against the government's increasing authoritarianism.

The premise of the novel – the means for transporting us to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi – is an original one. As the title says, there's a dog in Georgia, a wonderful, fluffy white dog who worked as a crossing guard at an elementary school, and this dog is lost, or perhaps kidnapped. Amy Webb of New York City has been following the situation on YouTube, donating money to an organization called Justice for Angelozi (the dog's name, which means "Angel").

At the opening of the novel by Grodstein – whose other books include " Our Short History " – a couple of unsettling things happen to Amy: First, a pet psychic accosts her in the park and tells her that her own dog, Roxy, is secretly miserable. That night, a lovely young hostess at her husband Judd's trendy restaurant texts him some nudes, and though he claims he's not involved with her, Judd has cheated in the past and she isn't sure.

So, when Irine Benia of Justice for Angelozi writes to thank her for her generous donations, Amy makes a snap decision to visit Tbilisi and help with the search. It seems as good an approach as any to dealing with her own lostness – she was briefly a model, and after that, a chef; after that, an adjunct writing prof and caretaker of her stepson. But he's away at college, she has no classes this semester, and all this, plus Judd's possible infidelity, is adding up to an identity crisis at age 46.

Amy is an appealing character with an interesting set of skills, knowledge, and flaws. Skills: the approach to pasta primavera she breaks out in Irine's kitchen may well inspire readers to revisit this dish. Knowledge: dog trivia galore. For example, the discouraging fact that black animals are adopted from shelters less than half as frequently as light-colored ones. Flaws: Amy is no money manager. But it's kind of fun to watch her throw around piles of bills.

What she finds during her two-week stay in Georgia is complicated. From Irine and her teenage daughter Maia, as well as from a Russian army deserter staying in their home, she receives a somewhat harsh education in what American life looks like from the outside.

"Your husband makes the money, am I right?" says Irina. "Or his family makes the money, you're not even sure? And all you have to do is wake up every day and decide if you feel like eating this or that, or if you feel like walking your dog here or there. Or teaching, or not teaching. It doesn't matter. You are taken care of. You do not have to make any hard choices."

This is not completely wrong, but even a pampered New York dog whisperer does confront moral choices. In the course of a surprising series of events that closes the novel, Amy opens her eyes and faces them.

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

OXS / TNS

A OXS S5 Soundbar.

A great soundbar can enhance your TV

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

For anyone who is not familiar with a soundbar, you need to be. A simple comparison of the sound your TV emits from the built-in speakers compared to how the same TV sounds with **OXS's S5 Soundbar**, proves it doesn't compare. The S5 is the device that will make or break the enjoyment of a media room or even a single-TV setup.

The OXS S5 with Dolby Atmos is filled with features, including a built-in subwoofer that enhances the overall audio experience by adding depth, and it can bring movie theater sound to your home. Soundbars fall into the category of "you don't need them, until you try one." Then you are hooked.

I'm a believer in soundbars, and my wife could not care less. But while having some friends over recently, I turned the sound off of the soundbar to the speaker and switched it to the TV's speakers. Instantly the reaction was "What happened to the sound?" So my unofficial survey proved my point.

There are a variety of user friendly connection options including Bluetooth, HDMI eARC connectivity. The simple and most secure way is with a single HDMI cable to get Dolby Atmos sound, which is my choice.

And the connection method determines how it can be mounted or placed in an entertainment center. The ideal place for the speaker is front and center.

Along with the internal subwoofer, the all-in-one AC powered OXS S5 has a 230 watt peak output along with 6 drivers integrated among the 4-inch subwoofer, center speaker, and 2-inch full range drivers. The Dolby Atmos 3.1.2. technology delivers clear and crisp audio at any volume, and with the S5, louder is the way to go for the movie theater experience.

I had the S5 setup and running right out of the box with the default settings. It can be customized for your personal sound preference with equalizer mode choices of standard, movie, music, night and news. You can also adjust the adjustable treble and bass.

https://oxsaudio.com/products/oxs-s5-dolby-atmos-3-1-2ch-tv-soundbar, $199

When a pipe breaks, it's never a good thing. **Zircon's Leak Alert Wi-Fi Smart Water Detector** is a valuable investment for homeowners and property managers. For a small cost, they can be placed under sinks, toilets, water heaters or wherever water pipes are located, to alert you to a water leak.

It is hub and wire free. The setup takes just a few minutes. Insert the included battery, connect to its network on a computer, and then enter the supplied IP address in a web browser. Connect it to your Wi-Fi, add your personal contact information and you'll receive a confirmation email. You're done.

Close the cover, test it and then place it where needed. Once water touches a small wire built into the case, the alarm and alerts go off. The Zircon Leak Alert water detector features three alerts: a loud 105 dB alarm, which can sound for up to 8 hours; an email notification; and a flashing red LED for visibility in hard-to-see places, such as under sinks.

When the battery is low, a low battery indicator will warn you it needs replacement.

https://shop.zircon.com/leak-alert-wifi/, $49.99

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @ greggellman.

B Zircon Leak Alert Wi-Fi Smart Water Detector.
Zircon / TNS

How you can avoid the latest online scam

At least 73 percent of U.S. adults have fallen for a virtual con

By KAREN GARCIA
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Online scammers continue to dupe a majority of American adults as they infiltrate virtual calendars and security systems meant to defend users against the poaching of personal information.

A recent survey of more than 9,000 U.S. adults by the Pew Research Center found that approximately 73 percent experienced at least one or more online scams or attacks.

The most common virtual cons were credit card fraud, online shopping scams and ransomware attacks – a type of malicious software that prevents you from accessing your computer files or system until a ransom is paid.

About 24 percent of those surveyed said they had received a scam email, text message or call that tricked them into giving away personal information.

An estimated 32 percent of respondents said they were victims of a scam within the last year.

It's often said that older adults are more vulnerable to online fraudsters. However, in 2021, the Federal Trade Commission reported that Gen Z adults, millennials and Gen Xers, collectively between the ages of 18 and 59, were 34 percent more likely than adults who are 60 and older to report losing money to fraud.

These generational groups are getting tricked by online schemes that originate from a social media ad, an investment scam or fake job opportunities.

The latest phishing attacks, or attempts to acquire sensitive data, are happening through your online calendar, (Google or Outlook calendar), multi-factor authentication app and HTML attachments.

Evading online scams is proving to be a challenge, but cybersecurity experts say there are steps you can take to protect yourself.

Unsolicited calendar invites

Scammers are constantly finding new ways to lure you into unknowingly giving up your personal information and the calendar connected to your email account is one of them, said Iskander Sanchez-Rola, director of artificial intelligence and innovation for Norton.

Unlike traditional phishing scams such as an unwanted text or call that requires your engagement, this invitation automatically appears on your calendar without you approving or denying it.

Dreamstime /TNS

Anyone can easily be fooled by this because it can confuse you into thinking you accepted the invitation at some point, Sanchez-Rola said.

The scam happens when you click on the invite to get more information.

A link in the invitation can lead you to a phishing webpage that is masquerading as a Zoom link, or it can prompt you to download malware that is disguised as a software update.

This con often targets work-related email accounts and corresponding calendar apps.

The warning signs of this scam include:

■ The calendar invite is unsolicited.

■ There are misspellings in the link or sender address associated with the calendar appointment.

■ The invite is associated with work, but you're the only person to receive it.

What you can do: Change the settings in your online calendar to prohibit automatic updates. Microsoft Outlook users can follow these online instructions to change their calendar settings; Google users can limit which invitations appear on their schedule by following these online instructions.

If you have any suspicions, don't reply directly to the invite, said Derek Manky, chief security strategist and global vice president of threat intelligence at Fortinet.

"Instead, send an email to your trusted contact from that organization asking if they have confirmed the meeting and request further details," Manky said.

Multi-factor authentication scam

A multi-factor authentication app, also known as a "two-step verification," is an application on your phone that provides you with a code or a "yes or no" prompt to verify that you're accessing an account that's linked to the authenticator.

"Multi-factor authentication attacks have been happening for well over a decade," Manky said. "They just frequently take on new forms, or target new platforms such as the authenticator app."

A scam occurs when you're receiving multiple notifications from the authentication app even though you didn't request verification.

"This scam is all about wearing you down to the point of clicking an unknown notification and accidentally providing your personal information," Sanchez-Rola said.

The warning signs of this scam include:

■ The authentication app is requesting verification or providing you with a verification code you did not request.

■ The authentication app is sending you several notifications in a row even though you did not prompt the app.

What you can do: If you're getting a string of authentication app notifications, pause before you click.

"Approving a login you didn't request is like handing your keys to a stranger," Sanchez-Rola said. "You just don't do it."

A safer way to use an authentication app – such as 2FAS, Aegis Authenticator, Microsoft Authenticator, Stratum or Google Authenticator – is to use one that provides you with a verification code. Don't use an app that sends a notification because that's how a scammer can pressure you into providing your login information.

Another step in protecting yourself is changing your passwords frequently, as it reduces the shelf-life for the ones that are stolen and sold, Manky said.

Emails with unknown HTML attachments

An email with an unknown HTML attachment can redirect you to a phishing webpage or prompt you to download malware.

It's the oldest technique in the book but it's still commonly used today, Manky said.

"HTM/HTML files contain code that can be used in a variety of ways, including executing malicious scripts, for example Javascript, that could drop an information stealer on the system," he said. "Likewise, they could be used to launch a phishing page to harvest credentials."

Fraudsters will try to use trusted names or services that are of daily use to you.

"If an email is unsolicited, the end user should always question the identity of the emails being sent," Manky said.

The warning signs of this scam include:

■ The sender of the email is an unknown contact.

■ The attachment within the email is unsolicited and looks suspicious.

What can you do: Always exercise caution before opening any attachments in an email, Manky said.

Look for typosquatting in the URL of the attachment. Typosquatting is when domain names on the URL have a small variation from the legitimate one, Manky said.

Password protecting your important notes and files

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

This week a reader writes, "In (a recent) column you mentioned that you keep some of your passwords in your iPhone in a locked note. Could you please explain how one locks a note? It sounds So useful. Also, on a PC using windows, is there a way to lock an individual file? I'm thinking particularly of a spreadsheet that might contain passwords."

I know plenty of people who keep their important computer and website login names and passwords in a small notebook. This is fine for people who do most of their computing at home, but I am more likely to need my saved information when I'm away from home.

I have my Notes app synced to iCloud, so all the notes are available on all my Apple devices.

Since I always have my iPhone with me, I decided to store my important login information in in the Notes app on the phone.

My phone is pretty secure. It has Face ID, which means I've scanned my face and the phone will unlock when it senses it is me trying to use it. Setting up Face ID requires the user to also set a passcode of at least four characters to use if your face cannot be recognized.

I might be satisfied that my passwords are secure on my phone, but Apple's Notes app allows the user to lock notes.

First you create a new note or open an existing note. Look for three dots on the upper right and touch the dots to bring up a menu. You'll see Lock on the menu. You'll be asked to enter your iPhone's passcode, then if your iPhone has Face ID, you'll be asked if you'd like to enable face unlocking for notes on your phone. It's up to you, but I think Face ID is about as secure as it gets.

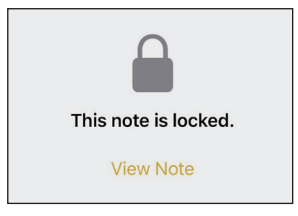
If you'd like to set a custom passcode for your notes, you can enter the phone's Settings, then scroll down to Apps and then find Notes. You'll see a password section where you can choose to use the iPhone's passcode or a custom passcode to open your notes.

Android users should check whatever notes app they use to see if there are options to set passwords to protect the notes.

You can choose to protect individual files on Windows by using the built-in encryption feature or creating a compressed file that's password-protected.

Encryption is the more secure option. Right-click the file and go to Properties>Advanced and select "Encrypt contents to secure data." You'll be able to set a password.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossman techadviser@gmail.com.



Jim Rossman / TNS

Plenty of people keep important passwords in a small notebook, but sometimes you may need your saved information when you're away from home.

HOME&GARDEN

Art in pairs

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Artwork can be used for both color and size as well as texture. For large walls, oversized art helps make a room feel less cavernous. An alternative to a single oversized art piece is to use art in a series.

Placing art in pairs is a "go to" design hack. Creating a diptych or two pieces of art side by side can be achieved with art that is either similar or identical.

Looking for ways to incorporate interesting art combinations into your home? Here are some top tips.

- Look for pairs that are identical sizes and shapes
- Select artwork for both color and texture
- Select artwork that has frames with similar materials or color
- Use artwork to compliment existing finishes such as black, gold or silver
- Use art in a series to "tell or story" or scene

Cathy Hobbs is a nationally recognized real estate stager and celebrity interior designer based in New York City. Cathy is the owner of the NYC + Hudson Valley-based interior design, home staging firm Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes and the author of the book "Home Design Recipes." www.cathyhobbs.com.

TOP: Two identical pieces of art serve to anchor this living room. **ABOVE:** Two horizontal identical pieces of art help to elongate this living space. **LEFT:** Two similar but not identical pieces of art blend silver and gold in this dining area.
Photos by Cathy Hobbs / TNS

How can I maintain my gutters?

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

Leaves and debris getting into your gutters can create a serious homeowner headache. Gutter cleaning is all about clearing out leaves, dirt, and twigs from your gutters and downspouts to keep rainwater flowing freely from your roof to the ground.

Professional gutter cleaning can clear out this mess. It's not glamorous, but it's a critical task to protect your home from top to bottom.

Neglecting your gutters can lead to a cascade of problems. When debris blocks the flow, water pools and seeps into your roof, causing rot that weakens the structure. It can drip into your attic, staining ceilings and walls.

Down the line, waterlogged shingles soffits, and fascias, the parts that shield and ventilate your roof, start to fail, inviting mold, mildew and algae that ruin your home's curb appeal. Worse, water spilling over can soak the soil around your foundation, causing it to expand and contract. This stresses your foundation, leading to cracks, uneven floors, and doors that won't close right.

Myroslav Kuchynskyi / Dreamstime / TNS

Neglecting your gutters can lead to a cascade of problems. When debris blocks the flow, water pools and seeps into your roof, causing rot that weakens the structure.

Then there's the pest problem. Standing water in clogged gutters is an open invitation for mosquitoes, flies and even rodents. Squirrels and birds see a pile of leaves as prime real estate for nests, and before you know it, they're sneaking into your attic. Regular gutter maintenance keeps these uninvited guests at bay and saves you from costly repairs or calls to pest control down the road.

Plan to clean gutters twice a year, in spring and fall. If overhanging branches are a constant issue, you might need more frequent cleanups. Hiring a professional costs $120 to $220, depending on your home's size and the mess's severity. Pros also spot issues like sagging gutters or worn downspouts that could escalate if ignored.

You can clean your gutters yourself if you're comfortable working on a ladder, but be sure to observe ladder safety. Use the buddy system by having a second person steady the ladder on the ground, and resist the urge to try to reach just a little bit farther. Be aware that falls from ladders are among the most common household injuries, so hire a pro if you're not experienced or start to get in over your head.

Gutter cleaning services have experience in ladder safety and specialized tools and expertise to do the job swiftly and smoothly, which is a big reason to hire a professional. When hiring, verify local licensing requirements and confirm they carry liability and workers' comp insurance to cover any mishaps. Gutter cleaners get very busy in the fall months, so right now is a good time to get on their schedule.

Gutter guards can lighten the load. These mesh screens or helmet-style covers clip onto your gutters, catching debris before it builds up. While they're useful, they're not foolproof. Some still need occasional cleaning, but they can stretch the time between professional visits. Expect to pay $8 to $20 per linear foot. It's a worthwhile investment if you're tired of frequent maintenance calls.

Jack the Clown and his evil sidekick Chance at Universal Horror Unleashed in Las Vegas.
Universal Destinations & Experiences / TNS

Every day can be Halloween

Why theme parks are going big on year-round horror experiences

By TODD MARTENS
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

I turn a bend and see a figure in a cornfield. The gray sky is foreboding, a storm clearly on the horizon. When I take a step forward, I'm hit with a gust of wind and fog. Suddenly, it's no longer a silhouette in the haze but a scarecrow, shrouded in hay, lurching toward me.

Only I am not on a Midwestern farm, and there is no threat of severe weather. I'm in a warehouse in Las Vegas, walking through a maze called "Scarecrow: The Reaping." I jump back and fixate my phone's camera on the creature, but that only encourages them to step closer. I'm hurried out of the farmland and into a hall, where giant stalks now obscure my path.

Welcome to Universal Horror Unleashed, which aims to deliver year-round horrors and further expand theme park-like experiences beyond their hubs of Southern California and Central Florida. Horror Unleashed, which opened Aug. 14, is an outgrowth of Universal's popular fall event, Halloween Horror Nights, which has been running yearly at the company's Los Angeles park since 2006 and even longer at its larger Florida counterpart.

Like Halloween Horror Nights, there are maze-like haunted houses – four of them here themed to various properties such as "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and "The Exorcist." Their more permanent status allows for a greater production factor – think disappearing walls and more elaborate show scenes – and they are surrounded by brooding bars, a pop-up rock-inspired dance show and a host of original walk-around characters. "Hey, sugar," said a young woman as I near the warehouse's main bar, a wraparound establishment themed to a large boiler. The actor's face was scarred with blood, hinting at a backstory I didn't have time – or perhaps the inclination – to explore.

Horror Unleashed is opening just on the cusp of when theme parks and immersive-focused live experiences are entering one of the busiest times of the year: Halloween. The holiday, of course, essentially starts earlier each year. This year's Halloween Horror Nights begins Sept. 4, while Halloween season at the Disneyland Resort launches Aug. 22. Horror shows and films are now successful year-round, with the likes of "Sinners" and "The Last of Us" enrapturing audiences long before Oct. 31. Culture has now fully embraced the darker side of fairy tales.

"You can make every month horrific," says Nate Stevenson, Horror Unleashed's show director.

That's been a goal of David Markland, co-founder of Long Beach's Halloween-focused convention Midsummer Scream, which this year is set for the weekend of Aug. 15. When Midsummer Scream began in 2016, it attracted about 8,000 people, says Markland, but today commands audiences of around 50,000. "Rapidly, over the past 10 or 15 years, Halloween has become a year-round fascination for people," Markland says. "Halloween is a culture now. Halloween is a lifestyle. It's a part of people's lives that they celebrate year-round."

There will be challenges, a difficult tourism market among them, as visits to Las Vegas were down 11.3 percent in June 2025 versus a year earlier, according to data from the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. And then there's the question of whether audiences are ready for year-round haunts that extend beyond the fall Halloween season to winter, spring and summer. I entered Horror Unleashed for a media preview on an early August night when it was 105 degrees in the Las Vegas heat. It's also been tried before, albeit on a smaller scale. Las Vegas was once home to Eli Roth's Goretorium, a year-round haunted house that leaned on torture-horror and shuttered after about a year in 2013.

But Universal creatives are undaunted.

More than a decade, of course, has passed, and Horror Unleashed is more diverse in its horror offerings. A maze themed to Universal's classic creatures winds through a castle and catacombs with vintage-style horrors and a mid-show scene in which Frankenstein's monster comes alive. Original tale "Scarecrow: The Reaping," which began at Universal Studios Florida, mixes in jump scares with more natural-seeming frights, such as the aforementioned simulated dust bowl.

TJ Mannarino, vice president of entertainment, art and design at Universal Orlando, points to cultural happenings outside of the theme parks in broadening the terror scene – the success of shows such as "The Walking Dead" and "American Horror Story," which found audiences outside of the Halloween season, as well as "Stranger Things," which he says opened up horror to a younger crowd. Theme parks are simply reflecting our modern culture, which is craving darker fantasies. Universal, for instance, recently opened an entire theme park land focused on its classic monsters at its new Epic Universe in Florida, and even Disney is getting in on the action, as a villains-focused land is in the works for Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom.

"We think our audience really wants this," says Mannarino, noting theme park attendance surveys were prodding the company to give horror a permanent home. And at Universal's Orlando park, Halloween Horror Nights starts earlier, beginning in late August.

"Just a couple years ago, we started in August, and we were selling out August dates," Stevenson says. "On a micro level, we're seeing that, boy, it doesn't matter if you extend past the season or extend out before the season – people are coming. People want it."

Universal is betting on it, as the company has already announced that a second Horror Unleashed venue will be heading to Chicago in 2027. Smaller, more regional theme park-like experiences are once again something of a trend, as Netflix has immersive venues planned for the Dallas and Philadelphia regions, and Universal is also bringing a kid-focused park to Frisco, Texas.

There are antecedents for what Universal is attempting. Disney, for instance, tried an indoor interactive theme park with DisneyQuest, for which a Chicago location was short-lived and a Florida outpost closed in 2017. Star Trek: The Experience, a mix of theme park-like simulations and interactive theater, operated for about a decade in Las Vegas before it shuttered in 2008.

"I know there's horror fans and Halloween fans who are always looking for something to do," Markland says. "What (Universal is) doing is very ambitious and big, and so I'm nervous along with them. We'll see how it goes. I'm sure people will go as soon as it opens and through the Halloween season, but after that, I don't know. ... They've definitely invested in Halloween and horror fans. They're all-in."

Horror, says author Lisa Morton – who has written multiple books on the Oct. 31 holiday, including "Trick or Treat: A History of Halloween" – is thriving in part because today it is taken more seriously by cultural critics. The genre also has metaphorical qualities – the struggle, for instance, that is life, art and creativity in "Sinners" or the underlying themes of PTSD that permeated the latest season of "The Last of Us." That makes it especially appealing, she says, for today's stressful times.

"I suspect that's part of the reason horror is booming right now," Morton says. "Everything from climate change, that we seem to have no voice in, and our politics, that don't seem to represent us. Many of us are filled with anxiety about the future. I think horror is the perfect genre to talk about that. When you add a layer of a metaphor to it, it becomes much easier to digest."

To step into Horror Unleashed is to walk into a demented wonderland, a place that turns standard theme park warmth and joy upside down. Don't expect fairy tale-like happy endings. The space's centerpiece performance is twisted, a story centering on Jack the Clown and his female sidekick Chance, who have kidnapped two poor Las Vegas street performers and are forcing them to execute their acts to perfection to avoid murder. The deeper one analyzes it, the more sinister its class dynamics feel, even if it's an excuse to showcase, say, street dancing and hula hoop acrobatics.

The space has an underlying narrative. Broadly speaking, the warehouse is said to have been a storage place for Universal Studios' early monster-focused horror films. That allows it to be littered with props, such as the throne-like chair near its entrance, and for nooks and crannies such as a "film vault" to be renamed a "kill vault." Somehow – horror loves a good mystery – the space has come alive, and don't be surprised to be greeted by a vampire or a costumed swampland figure that may or may not be related to the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

The goal, says Universal creatives, is to give Horror Unleashed a bit of an immersive theater feel, something that can't really be done among the chaotic scare zones and fast-moving mazes of a Halloween Horror Nights event. But here, guests can linger with the actors and probe them to try to uncover the storyline that imbues the venue. One-to-one actor interaction has long been a goal of those in the theme park space but often a tough formula to crack, in part because cast members are costly and in part because of the difficulty to scale such experiences for thousands.

"As we've evolved this style of experience, we have given more and more control of the show to the actors," says Mannarino on what separates Horror Unleashed from Halloween Horror Nights. "It's less programmed. It's less technology. I've had conversations with tech magazines, and they'll ask me what is the most critical piece, and I'll say it's the actors. ... The lifeblood of our all stories – we can build all of this, but it doesn't go without the actors.

"It's what really drives this whole animal," he adds.

It extends a bit to the mazes as well. Audiences should expect to spend about five to seven minutes in each of the four walk-through attractions, but unlike a Halloween Horror Nights event, where guests are rushed from room to room without stopping, in Las Vegas there will be one dedicated show scene per maze. Here, groups will be held to watch a mini-performance. In the "Exorcist" maze, for instance, that means witnessing a full exorcism, complete with special effects that will have walls give way to demonic specters. In the '70s-themed "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" haunt, look out for a bloody scene designed to drench guests.

The mazes are intended to be semi-permanent. Stevenson says there's no immediate plans to swap them out in the near future but hints that Horror Unleashed will be an evolving venue and, if all goes according to plan, will look a bit different in a few years. Thus, he says the key differentiator between Horror Unleashed and Halloween Horror Nights is not necessarily the tech used in the mazes, but the extended time they can devote to unwrapping a story.

"When Universal builds a haunted house, the level of story that starts that out is enormous," Stevenson says. "There's so much story. All of our partners need that because they base every little nuanced thing off of that story. Unfortunately, we don't always have the chance to tell that story, and all our fans tell us they want to know more story."

Story percolates throughout the venue. Flatbreads, for instance, are shaped like chainsaw blades. Desserts come on plates that are mini-shovels. Salad dressing is delivered in syringes. In the past, says Mannarino, no one wanted their food to be played with. "'Don't do horrible things to my food!'" he says in mock exaggeration. "But now, people really love that."

Little, it seems, is obscene, when every day can be Halloween.

TRAVEL TIPS

Jemaa el-Fnaa in Marrakesh, Morocco.

Dreamstime / TNS

10 tips for using credit cards while traveling

By BENÉT J. WILSON
Bankrate.com (TNS)

I've traveled to all 50 states, two of the five U.S. territories and 60 countries for business and pleasure. I understand that credit card balances are the last thing you want to be thinking about while traveling.

However, just because you're away, it doesn't stop bad things from happening to your credit cards, so it's important to enjoy yourself, but also stay vigilant.

Thanks to mobile banking apps and digital wallets, it's easier than ever to keep track of authorized – and unauthorized – spending on credit cards, especially if you're out of the country. Keeping an eye on your accounts can warn you about any fees or security risks. Ensure the safety of your credit cards – and enjoy your time away – with these 10 tips I've learned during my decades of travel.

1. Let card issuers know you're traveling

Notify your credit and debit card issuers before a trip to avoid having your first purchase abroad get flagged for fraud. I was in Brazil for a week on business and couldn't use my credit card because the company thought it had been stolen. To make it even worse, I couldn't call to let them know because my calls weren't going through.

Pro tip

Check your bank or credit card app. There's usually a section where you can let issuers know of your upcoming travel plans without having to pick up a phone.

2. Set up alerts

Before going out of the country, definitely sign up for alerts. Finding out about any issues with your cards as they happen will allow you to resolve them quickly, so you can get back to having fun.

Pro tip

Most card issuers allow you to choose which alerts you want.

3. Keep information safe

One time, my wallet was stolen during a weekend trip to New York City. Guess who didn't have access to all her credit cards? I spent hours canceling my cards and filing reports, since I didn't have easy access to the numbers listed on all my cards.

Now I have my information stored in my Apple iCloud account. If I should happen to lose my cards again (knock on wood), I'll be able to cancel them quickly.

Pro tip

If you want a more robust cloud storage option, consider paying a company to keep your information safe.

4. Avoid foreign transaction fees

These are surcharges paid by credit card holders on international transactions, ranging from 1 percent to 3 percent of the total purchase and split between networks and card issuers. Those percentages can seem small, but if you end up on a shopping spree in Paris, it can add up rapidly.

Check the small print in your credit card's terms and fees to see if your issuer charges foreign transaction fees.

Pro tip

Here are the best credit cards with no foreign transaction fees.

5. Say no to dynamic currency conversion

When traveling in a foreign country, you might need to pay in local currency, according to a Visa report on dynamic currency conversion (DCC). A merchant or ATM offers the option to pay in your home currency via DCC, which includes exchange rate and additional fees.

If you're like me and hate doing conversions, DCC sounds like a great idea, but it's not. You're paying your money for the perk of seeing what you're being charged in your home currency. Customers using DCC in Europe paid between 2.6 percent and 12 percent in fees, which is "a scam," according to a 2017 study from the European Consumer Organization.

American Express, Mastercard and Visa require merchants and ATMs to clearly display purchase and withdrawal amounts in local and cardholder's currency, use both currency symbols, show the exchange rate used for the conversion and show any additional fees or markups.

Pro tip

Skip DCC by downloading a currency converter app (my favorite is Xe) and let it do the calculations for you.

6. Use electronic payments

I will always carry at least one physical credit card when traveling. But thanks to the proliferation of smartphone-based electronic apps and digital wallets – and a wider acceptance of them – you no longer have to worry about lost or stolen credit cards.

Instead, I now whip out Apple Pay, choose a debit or credit card and make my payment. Face ID or passcodes offer an extra layer of protection.

Pro tip

Add two-factor authentication on your smartphone as an extra layer of protection.

7. Be vigilant

Just because you're having fun on your vacation doesn't mean you should relax when it comes to your credit and debit cards. ATM machines, gas pumps and point-of-sale terminals may have a skimming device that can steal your debit card pin, allowing thieves to empty your bank account. There's also the shim, a device inserted into the chip card reader slot at ATMs or point-of-sale terminals that can intercept and record your card information.

At ATMs and POS terminals, look for anything loose, crooked, damaged or scratched. Pull at the edges of the keypad to ensure there's no overlay before entering your PIN,

At a gas station, choose the credit rather than debit option and always cover the keypad when you enter your PIN. Check the keypad for inconsistencies in coloring, material or shape that could be a keypad overlay. Pay inside with an attendant, not outside at the pump. Tap your card instead of swiping or inserting it when paying at the pump if that option is available.

Pro tip

Be on high alert for skimming devices in heavily trafficked tourist areas, as ATMs and POS terminals are easy and popular targets.

8. Check your travel perks

You may normally use your credit cards primarily for cash back or points rewards. But many cards also have extra benefits that can enhance or make your travel experience easier.

A few common travel benefits include:

- Car rental insurance
- Concierge services
- Free breakfasts or late checkouts at hotels
- Free or discounted medical travel insurance
- Emergency evacuation insurance

And while traveling, make sure to earn rewards on your spending. Your cash-back card with dining rewards can be useful for trying new restaurants, while a travel rewards card may help you save on car rentals or excursions.

Pro tip

Budget your credit card spending before your trip and make sure you can pay off your charges in full before the due date. It's fun to see your points and miles pile up, but they become less valuable when you're paying interest on your credit card balance.

9. Do your research

Cards from some issuers are more widely accepted than others around the world, and you don't want to arrive in another country with no way to pay.

I went on a two-week dream trip to Morocco in 2020 and brought The Platinum Card® from American Express, my Chase debit card and Capital One VentureOne Rewards Credit Card on the trip.

I added the VentureOne card at the last minute, which was smart because many of the places I visited in Morocco did not accept American Express cards. I've also been in countries that don't accept Discover cards.

It can help to ask your card's customer service about its acceptance rates where you're going, but also consider other sources. Before you leave, talk with your travel agent (if you have one) and your hotel, innkeeper or concierge, too.

Pro tip

When I was planning a family trip to Cuba, a friend told me about a Facebook group, "Unlocking the Mystery of Cuba," which was a mother lode of useful information. Check out groups on Facebook and Reddit to get the scoop on travel destinations.

10. Practice Wi-Fi security

For credit data harvesters, public Wi-Fi is an all-you-can-eat buffet. Ditto for those public-use computers in internet cafes and hotel business centers. Avoid them for anything other than reading the morning paper or checking the weather.

Need to check balances? Use your cellphone's LTE or 5G network to log in to your bank, issuer's app or a website. Or look for an 800 number or international phone number to call your card issuer for more information.

Pro tip

Consider signing up with a VPN provider for security while you surf. I installed Express VPN when I traveled to China. It allowed me to connect up to eight electronic devices. I was able to have internet access to sites that the government banned. Express VPN is free for 30 days, then the cost starts at $12.95 a month.

The bottom line

Traveling is pleasurable, but losing your credit card or having it stolen is not. By taking precautions, you can get more out of your credit card while you are traveling. Keep your card issuer informed about your plans so that your card use in faraway places passes muster.

Cards from some issuers are more widely accepted than others, so make sure your card has broad acceptance at your destination. Also, watch out for credit card skimming at ATMs and other attempts at fraud. And go with a travel credit card whose travel rewards and benefits you can reap.